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Chapter 1: New Clanmate

[image]

(Emberkit)

"Time to wake up little one." I hear a warm voice and a soft muzzle nudging me. I open my eyes and see a she-cat with beautiful blue eyes and fur. I'm about to speak when a bundle of fur hit me in the back. "You're finally awake, yay!"

I turn and see a she-kit with ginger colored fur. I hear a rustle and lift my head up and watch a flame colored tom pad into the nursery. "How are they, Bluestar?" I look up at my mother as she purrs and draws her tongue over my ear "They're perfect."

"Emberkit, Sandkit, this is your father, Firestorm." I look up at the powerful tom and sniff his pelt. I hear him purr and he rubs my cheek with his. I let out a mrrow of laughter and purr, licking his cheek. He looks down at me with affection and love.

"Are you ready to go outside?" I look at my mother and Sandkit nods eagerly. I stand up and follow them outside. My parents sit in a patch of sunlight and watch us play. My sister is playing with some moss and I'm sneaking up on Firestorm's tail.

It's twitching back and fourth in amusement as he watches my sister play. Once I'm close enough, I pounce and land squarely on his tail. He turns and looks at me with amusement and he dislodges me with a small shake. "Firestorm!" I look up as a cat with golden fur steps out of a den.

"Bluestar, who's that?" I ask her and she turns to look at the cat. "That's Sunfall, your father's trusted friend, Firestorm is the deputy and I'm the leader." I stare at my father in awe as he leaps over to join the golden tom and they talk in hushed whispers.

I open my eyes and look out at the empty clearing of the camp. The moon is half full and I'm about to go back to sleep when I see a cat heading for the camp entrance. I look closer and recognize, Graypaw. I look at the gray tom, sneaking out.

I wait for him to slip through the entrance before following. I stay a fox-length back and follow him up the ravine. I'm sure he's just exploring the forest. Then I hear yowling. I scramble up a tree and look down below. I see a blur of orange and grey. They finally break apart and I see an orange tom cat maybe six moons old.

I scramble down the tree and slip into the clearing. Graypaw whips around and hisses at me. "Easy there, tiger, it's just me." Graypaw licks his chest fur in embarrassment. "Sorry, Emberkit."

I pad up to the two toms and sniff the orange tom. "You smell weird, are you another Clan cat?" I ask and he shakes his head, the collar around his neck jingles. "Hey, Emberkit, what're you doing out of camp?"

"I could ask you both the same question." I whip around and see Firestorm and Bluestar. "Bluestar..." I begin but she raises her tail, silencing me and I hang my head. "What's your name?" Firestorm flicks his tail toward the tom. "Rusty." He sits and curls his tail around his paws, unaware of the trouble he's in but bows his head in respect.

I purr at his show of respect but with no trace of fear. Bluestar regards the tom with curiosity. "Emberkit, Graypaw, come on we're going back to camp." I brush his flank with my tail tip. "Goodbye, Rusty, I hope to see you again."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting." Bluestar gives me one final lick before pushing me into the clearing beside Sandkit and jumping onto the Highrock. I stand at the foot of the Highrock as Bluestar looks down at me.

"Emberkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Emberpaw. Willowpelt, you are ready

for another apprentice, I hope you pass on all your wisdom to this apprentice."

I turn and see a pretty pale she-cat and touch noses with her. "Sandkit, until you have earned your warrior name you will be know as Sandpaw. Whitestorm, you are ready for another apprentice." Sandpaw turns to a white tom and touches noses with him.

I turn toward Willowpelt and nod eagerly. I follow Willowpelt out of the camp entrance and up the ravine. I run down the ravine with Willowpelt a fox-length behind me. I turn to look at her when I barrel into someone. I hiss in anger and I look up at who ran into me.

I see Lionheart. "Sorry, Lionheart, I didn't see you." I scramble onto my paws and lick my chest fur in embarrassment. "Emberpaw, we have a new member of the Clan." Lionheart steps aside and I see Rusty.

I purr and pad up to Rusty. "Welcome back, Rusty." I brush his flank with my tail and he purrs. "Well, come on, do you want to see the camp?" He nods and we run to the camp with Lionheart and Willowpelt behind us.

As soon as Bluestar announces that Rusty is joining the Clan, it erupts into chaos. "He's a kittypet, he has no place in our Clan!" I look over and see Longtail, he's lashing hid tail angrily. "Longtail, you have no say in this," I mew at him and he turns his eyes on me.

"You don't have a say either, apprentice!" He stalks toward me and I meet him half way, growling at his smug expression. All of a sudden Rusty is standing in front of me, growling at Longtail. I hear the twinkling of the bell on his collar. Longtail hears it too and starts laughing and I unsheathe my claws.

All of a sudden Longtail launches himself at Rusty but the orange tom slips underneath him and with his right leg kicks Longtail in the stomach. Longtail hits the ground and I snicker. The tan tom jumps to his feet and turns on me. He tries to swipe at me but I duck and strike a blow of my own. I claw his nose and see blood

well up and drip down.

He growls at me and is about to attack when Rusty lands on his back and digs his claws into his spine. Longtail hisses in pain and pushes off the ground onto his two feet and I knew he's about to fall backwards. "Rusty, let go he's going to crush you!"

But he's already pushing away and Longtail hits the ground. While Longtail's disoriented Rusty rakes his claws down Longtail's flank. Longtail yowls in pain and jumps to his feet and launches himself at Rusty. They're rolling around the clearing in a blur of teeth and claws.

I see in the midst of the battle Longtail grabbing hold of Rusty's collar and trying to choke him. "Rusty!" I try to step forward but Bluestar's tail bars my way.

"What are you doing he'll die!" She doesn't answer me but stares intently at the battle. Then Rusty's collar breaks and Longtail flies backwards while Rusty sucks in deep breathes. I run up to him and rub his cheek with mine and he purrs as he stands up. "I'm so glad your collar broke before he hurt you any worse."

"I'm fine. Don't worry, Emberpaw." At that moment sunlight strikes Rusty's pelt and it glows like fire. "The newcomer has lost his twoleg collar in a battle for his honor, StarClan has spoken it's approval--- this cat has been released from the hold of his twoleg owners and is free to join ThunderClan as an apprentice." Rusty nods with pride glowing in his eyes and I nudge his shoulder with my muzzle. Bluestar approaches us and nods approvingly.

"You fought well." Bluestar turns and addresses the rest of the Clan. "From this day forward, until he has earned his warrior name, this apprentice will be called Firepaw, in honor of his flame-colored coat."

Longtail growls and limps out of the clearing toward a fern-shaded corner. The Clan starts murmuring to each other excitedly. "Hey, Firepaw!" We hear Graypaw's friendly mew. I purr and pressed my cheek to Graypaw's. "He was great, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, that scar you left on his ear won't let him forget you in a hurry, you've spoiled his good looks, that's for sure."

"Thanks, Graypaw." I look at Firepaw and see a scratch above his eye. I lean forward and lick it. "When we have time, we should ask Spottedleaf to take a look at you." Firepaw purrs and dips his head in agreement.

Chapter 2: Battle With RiverClan

[image]

(Emberpaw)

I pad into camp with a thrush and a squirrel in my jaws and drop my prey onto the fresh-kill pile. I pad over to the elders' den and slip inside. "Can I get you anything?" I ask and Dappletail purrs. "Some prey, please, Emberpaw."

"You are going to be a great warrior," Halftail purrs and the other elders murmur their agreement. I purr and slip out of the den. I grab a rabbit from the pile and give it to the elders. I'm getting ready to go out hunting again when a voice stops me.

"What's a kittypet like you doing here in the first place?" I listen to Dustpaw's jibe but I'm shocked when I hear my sister chime in. "A kittypet doesn't have what it takes to be a real warrior!" I turn my head and see Firepaw facing off against Dustpaw and Sandpaw. Firepaw's ears are flat against his head and his pelt is bristling.

I run over and cuff both apprentices on the ears. They turn and glare at me through narrowed slits. "How dare you insult Firepaw like that! He's been training his hardest and looking after everyone in the Clan. Which is more than I can say for you two, spending all your time thinking up mouse-brain kittypet jibes!" I snap at them and Sandpaw winces but Dustpaw just glares at me.

"Well said, Emberpaw, I think you're almost ready to earn your warrior name." I turn and see Whitestorm, Sandpaw's mentor. Sandpaw hangs her head in shame and Whitestorm tells both apprentices to search the elders for ticks and clean their bedding.

"Thanks for sticking up for me, Emberpaw." Firepaw hangs his head and I brush my tail against his flank catching his attention.

"Hey, don't listen to those mouse-brains, your probably the most hard working cat I've ever seen." He purrs and I press against him and lead him to the fresh-kill pile. I pick a mouse and Firepaw grabs a thrush. I just start eating when Willowpelt pads up to me. I have been training with Firepaw, Graypaw, and Ravenpaw for at least three or four moons.

I feel a pang in my heart when I think of Ravenpaw, Firepaw came back one night saying that he had been killed on the thunder path. I feel another pang at the loss of Spottedleaf, who was lost when Clawface killed her attempting to steal kits from our camp.

Yellowfang the former medicine cat from ShadowClan is now ours. "Hey, Emberpaw, you're almost ready for your warrior assessment." Excitement shoots through my pelt at the thought of becoming a warrior. Willowpelt grabs some prey and shares it with Whitestorm.

I feel someone lick my head, I turn my head and see my mother. "I'm proud of you." I purr and rub my head against her chin. I hear, Smallear hiss and that means trouble. Firestorm, Lionheart and Runningwind come haring into camp their pelts bristling in fear and rage.

"RiverClan attacked us at Sunningrocks!" Firestorm wails and Bluestar stares at the small patrol. Now that I'm closer I see that my father has claw marks along his flank, Runningwind's ear is shredded and bleeding, Lionheart has some scratches and clumps of fur missing.

"A few other cats are still fighting them please..." My father trails off sounding horrified. "Ok, Willowpelt, Whitestorm, Firepaw, Graypaw, and Emberpaw come on!" I jump to my paws alongside Firepaw and Graypaw.

We race to Sunningrocks and I can already hear the fighting as my father's patrol runs alongside us. I stay close to Firepaw brushing my flank with his as we run. I hear cats screeching and can hear my Clanmates crying out in pain.

With eyes narrow in rage I leap forward with my Clan. I see Darkstripe fighting with a smoky tom, I've seen him at a gathering

it's Blackclaw! But I can tell Darkstripe is tired and the RiverClan warrior easily batts at him with his claws.

I leap forward and fling myself onto Blackclaw and dig my claws into his spine. He screeches in pain and desperately tries to shake me off. I rake my claws down his side and bite down hard into Blackclaw's shoulder. After giving him wounds to think about I let him go and he runs wailing into the river.

I notice the battle shift and we start winning against the RiverClan warriors and more of them go howling into the water. Darkstripe blinks gratefully at me and I dip my head and together we fight side by side until the last RiverClan warrior has been chased back into the river.

Only Leopardfur's left after she had ordered her Clan to retreat. "This isn't over, ThunderClan!"

"Get lost fish-breath," I hiss at her and after she growls at me, she disappears into the water. I sit down panting and lick my paw before running it over the cut above my eye. "Emberpaw!" I turn and see Firestorm run up to me, purring. "You were amazing!"

"Yeah, thank you for saving my pelt, Emberpaw." I turn and see Darkstripe behind me. I dip my head and lick my chest fur in embarrassment. "Your welcome, Darkstripe." I'm glad to have been born in ThunderClan. I look for Firepaw and Graypaw, I find them talking to their mentors.

I realize my mother, who was Firepaw's mentor, has shown up. "You two fought well. Let's go back and get Yellowfang to take a look at your wounds. Come on, Emberpaw." I nod and we walk with the Clan back to camp. "Let all cats old to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!" Bluestar yowls and I look up at her on the Highrock in surprise.

We'd just settled down sharing tongues when she calls the Clan meeting. I get up with Firepaw and join the circle with the rest of the Clan. "Emberpaw, step forward."

I stare at her and Firepaw nudges me forward. I pad forward and

Bluestar jumps down and stands in front of me. "I, Bluestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn." Bluestar looks down at me her eyes filling with pride.

"Emberpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?" I feel a jolt of excitement run through my pelt. "I do." I reply steadily.

"Then by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior name: Emberpaw, from this moment you will be known as Emberstep, StarClan honors your bravery and your strength, and we welcome you as a full member of ThunderClan."

Bluestar, rests her muzzle on top of my head and I lick her shoulder."Emberstep! Emberstep!" I glow with pride as the Clan chants my new name. "Emberstep!" I hear my father, sister, Graypaw, and Firepaw chant the loudest. "Wow, thank you, Bluestar."

"No, Emberstep, ThunderClan thanks you for your bravery in the battle today. Now tonight you sit vigil in honor of your new name but first let us eat." I grab a squirrel and Firepaw grabs a thrush. After I'm done eating, I lay down next to Firepaw and lick his fur smoothing it out.

After we're done sharing tongues, I start my vigil and Firepaw goes to sleep with Graypaw. I'm sitting vigil and the sun is coming up when Whitestorm pads out and flicks his tail toward me. "How does it feel to be a warrior?" I flick my tail in excitement and his whiskers twitch in amusement.

"You can speak now." I let out a sigh of relief and flick my tail happily and purr.

"Thank you, Whitestorm." I stretch and shake my pelt to ward off the early morning chill. "Go eat some food then get some sleep, Bluestar wants you to come to the Gathering tonight."

I nod and pad over to the fresh-kill pile and grab a shrew and gulp

it down in a few ravenous bites. I lick my lips and head to the warrior's den.

When I walk in, I freeze and look for an empty nest. I pick the one farthest from Tigerclaw and the one closet to Willowpelt and Lionheart, who were still asleep, and Firestorm a few mouse-lengths away. I curl up and close my eyes.

I open my eyes when someone nudges my shoulder. I'm still tired but I stand up and stretch. "Time to go." Bluestar pads out of the warrior's den and I follow her. I look at the group of warriors and apprentices that were going to the Gathering.

Firestorm, Willowpelt, Lionheart, Dustpaw, Sandpaw, Firepaw, Graypaw, Halftail, Yellowfang, me and Tigerclaw. I quickly groom my fur while waiting to head through the camp entrance. "Let's go." I follow my Clanmates through the tunnel and up the ravine. We stop at the edge of the clearing that leads down into Fourtrees.

Bluestar flicks her tail and streams down into the hollow where RiverClan, ShadowClan, WindClan have already gathered. I look at the full-moon high in the sky and not a single cloud in sight. I sit beside Firepaw and look up at the leaders: Crookedstar, Brokenstar, and Tallstar. I watch Bluestar climb on top of The Great Rock with the other leaders.

I look over in the RiverClan section and see Blackclaw with a ripped ear and a scar from my claws along his flank.

I flick my right ear in satisfaction and settle beside Firepaw and see that the meeting's about to start. Bluestar steps forward and gets ready to speak. "We have a new warrior that has proven her skills in a battle against RiverClan." She glares at Crookedstar in hatred before continuing. "Emberstep!"

All of the Clans turn their gaze on me and I hold my head up high, proud of my warrior name. Firepaw licks my shoulder and I purr. "Prey is running well in ThunderClan." Bluestar steps back and motions for anyone to go next. The Gathering went quickly and we returned to the camp.

Chapter 3: Search For WindClan

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I'm curled up, sleeping when I hear Runningwind's screech of alarm warning the Clan. Startled I jump to my paws and race into the clearing and see cats streaming into the camp. I breathe in their scent and recognized ShadowClan.

I growl and yowl out to the warriors while Firepaw tells the elders to run to the nursery and stations Darkstripe to guard it then threw himself into the battle. I look around the clearing and see Willowpelt getting attacked by two ShadowClan warriors.

With a snarl, I throw myself at the two ShadowClan cats. I bite one on the hamstring and hear him yowl in pain. After he twists away, he runs through the tunnel and into the forest. The other ShadowClan cat turns on me and Willowplet throws herself on the cat and pummels his spine with her claws.

I swipe my claws across his nose and after Willowpelt bites his shoulder he screeches and runs away. The battle wages for what seems like forever until finally the last ShadowClan warrior runs through the entrance. I sigh and lay down for a minute to lick my wounds.

I’m about to head to Yellowfang's den when I hear a wail of horror. I turn and see my father lying on the ground fidgeting. I run over with a cry and halt just a mouse-length from Firestorm.

"Daddy!" I rub his cheek with my own trying to get him up on his forelegs. "Emberstep?" I hear him croak and he opens his eyes. "Firestorm!"

I hear Sandpaw's pained mew as she skids to a stop behind me. I

look Firestorm up and down and notice his scruff glistens with blood. "Don't leave me, my love." Bluestar's standing behind Firestorm and is licking his cheek. "It is my time to die, I will see you in StarClan, my love."

"Please, stay!" I plead but Firestorm just licks my cheek and laid his head back down. "I was glad to have daughters such as you two. Sandpaw?" Sandpaw steps forward and looks down at her father's eyes. "Yes?"

"I want you to go easy on Firepaw, he's the one who pulled those crow-food eating warriors off me." I look at Firepaw but he dips his head and wouldn't look at me. Sandpaw mews her response and I turn my attention back on my father and sister. I see Firestorm lick Sandpaw's cheek before I see the light leave his eyes.

I wail in grief before I collapse and sob. Firepaw's at my side in an instant and hauls me onto my forelegs. "Come on, let's go over here." He leads me to a dark corner near the medicine cat's den. He supports me by pressing his flank against mine.

I lay down with him beside me. "He's gone. He's really gone, Firepaw." Firepaw presses his cheek against mine trying to comfort me. I see Bluestar, Frostfur, and Yellowfang moving Firestorm's body into the center of the clearing, along with Lionheart's.

I get up and Firepaw moves with me, watching me with concern. "I'll be fine." I say and move towards my father's body. I lay down and press my nose into his fur, sitting vigil. I hear the shuffle of fur as other cats sit around my father's body.

A paw prodding my side wakes me and I open my eyes. "Sorry, Emberstep the elders are burying Firestorm now," Frostfur says gently and I stand and stretch. I watch Dappletail, Halftail, Smallear, Patchpelt, and One-eye carry Firestorm out the tunnel for burial. I look up, dawn had passed and the sun is slowly rising.

I look at the fresh-kill pile and see its almost empty. I turn to the camp entrance about to go hunting when Bluestar calls a Clan meeting. "I have three important things to discuss. Yes, ShadowClan

did attack and our deputy, Firestorm, was killed as well as Lionheart. But two apprentices have proven themselves as honorable warriors."

I look around the clearing and my eyes stop on Dustpaw and Sandpaw. "Firepaw and Graypaw please step forward." I watch, surprised, as Firepaw and Graypaw step forward. "I, Bluestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

"Firepaw and Graypaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Bluestar asks them both and I see Firepaw and Graypaw's tails twitch with excitement. "I do." They both reply steadily.

I shake the morning chill from my pelt and exit the warriors den. It's the morning after the battle in ShadowClan camp where we helped them drive out their treacherous leader Brokenstar who had driven WindClan from their territory. I avenged my father that night.

I'm heading for the entrance tunnel when I hear, Yellowfang's voice. "Emberstep?!" I turn and see her padding toward me. "What?"

"Bluestar, wishes to speak with you." I nod and she turns and heads over to the Highrock. I wait for a moment before padding over to the Highrock. "May I enter?" I wait patiently for her reply. "Enter."

I hear her meow and enter Bluestar's den. I see her curled up with Frostfur at her side. I look closely at her shoulder and see that the wound looks infected. I open my mouth and draw air over my scent glands. I close it quickly at the scent of sickness.

"The bite on her shoulder is infected," Frostfur says and I see the spiderwebs on my mother's shoulder. "Emberstep. . ." Bluestar wheezes and I step closer. "I'd like you to go with Fireheart and bring back WindClan. Brokenstar cannot win, since his defeat I have thought long and hard. WindClan must be brought back to their

rightful home."

"How can just the two of us bring back, WindClan?" I ask sitting and wrapping my tail around my paws. "I can only send two, other warriors are needed here. Leaf-bare is coming and we must gather fresh-kill. And I trust you both. Emberstep you have fire in you, just like your father."

I feel tears in my eyes but I shake them away. "I won't let you down Bluestar." My mother purrs but it was disrupted with a cough. "Go, she needs rest." I nod and leave Frostfur with the ailing Leader. "Fireheart!" I call and find him exiting the warriors den. "Hey, Emberstep. What's going on?"

"I'll explain but first we need to eat then go to Yellowfang." Fireheart looks like he wants to ask questions but instead he just follows me over to the fresh kill pile. We eat before heading toward the medicine den.

"Yellowfang!" I call to the new medicine cat. "We've come for traveling herbs!" A hoarse mew can be heard from the shadow in the center of the rock, and Yellowfang squeezes out of the crack. "Where are you going?" She asks looking at the two of us.

"We're going to find WindClan and bring them back." Fireheart looks at me and I flick my ear. "Your first warrior mission!" Rasps Yellowfang. "Congratulations! I'll fetch the herbs you'll need."

She left and returns moments later carrying a bundle of dry leaves in her mouth. "Enjoy!" She purrs laying them on the ground. I lean down and begin to chew on the leaves. "Yuck!" Spat Fireheart, I nod screwing up my face but swallowing the herbs.

Spottedleaf had given them to Fireheart once before when he journeyed to the moonstone with Bluestar. After Fireheart finished his bundle, he nudges my shoulder with his nose. "Let's go! Bye, Yellowfang," He calls to the gray she-cat.

He seems to be close friends with Yellowfang ever since he brought her back to the Clan and took care of her while we kept her in camp.

He was also close friends with Spottedleaf, but I believe they held a deeper feeling for each other. I feel a weird pang in my heart at the thought but I push it away. "Bye, Yellowfang," I call before I follow him. "Good luck, youngsters!" She calls back as we head for the exit then to the camp entrance, up the ravine.

As we make our way to Fourtrees, I stay silent thinking about Fireheart's relationship with Spottedleaf. He seemed to be captivated by the dark beautiful dapple tortoiseshell she-cat. Fireheart nudges me with his shoulder, breaking me from my thoughts. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Huh- oh, I'm... I'm fine." I stammer uncontrollably. "I understand that Firestorm's death was hard for you and if you need anyone to talk to, I'll be all ears." He meows gently. I look at him and nod.

"Thanks, Fireheart."

"No problem, Emberstep." We continue our journey to Fourtrees. We stop at the top of a steep slope, breathing heavily, we made it to the moors. "WindClan's territory is beautiful." I meow in a whisper as I stare at the open sky and fields.

"But nothing compared to ThunderClan's territory," Fireheart mews and I flick my tail in agreement. Fireheart sniffs the wind blowing toward us and he stiffens. "Do you smell RiverClan warriors?" I sniff the air as well and notice what he did. A scent that wasn't supposed to be here. "They aren't supposed to be here, Fireheart."

"Maybe they want to make the most of WindClan's absence. Especially since they know we'll be bringing them back soon." We pad watchfully along a frozen turf trail sheltered by heather. A new wind brought stronger scents to our noses. "You smell that?"

"RiverClan!" I hiss, flattening myself to the ground. Fireheart crouches beside me, pressing his flank to mine, ears flat against his head. I carefully peer over the heather. "I can see them," I murmur. "Their hunting. Badly." Fireheart lifts his head up and I notice Blackclaw.

I see the rip in his ear and almost purr. The smoky-black tom

pounces on a field mouse, his claws unsheathed, but sits up with nothing to show for it. "They suck at hunting," I meow scornfully and with distain in my eyes.

"Guess they're used to catching fish. Let's get out of here before they see us." I nod and we stalk away undetected. We hide for a few minutes in an abandon fox hole and wait until the RiverClan cats are gone, before making our way to WindClan's camp.

As we near the hollow, I pad forward and peer over the edge. It's a big hole in the plateau filled with gorse that grew level to the ground on either side. Fireheart sniffs and so do I. I pick up on many WindClan scents. This must be the abandoned camp. Fireheart bounds down the slope and into the bushes. I follow close behind him, the gorse snags my fur as I push my way through it.

I curse as a thorn scratches my cheek. I shake my head, sending drops of blood flying. We push through into a sheltered clearing. At one end of the clearing stands a rock, worn smooth by many windblown moons.

"This has got to be their camp, no doubt about it." I mew and look around in wonder. This place is so well sheltered and protected. How had Brokenstar managed to chase them out. I notice how badly the camp looked. Clumps of fur litter the ground, dried blood stains the sand. Mossy nests had been dragged out of dens and torn apart.

And all over the place the stink of ShadowClan mingles with the WindClan cats fear scent. I notice Fireheart shudder as he too smells the scent of terror. "Let's find the scent trail out of here." It's easy to follow the direction they went, through drops of dried blood and fear scent.

Two moons of rain had failed to wash away the signs of suffrage. It wasn't hard for me to picture the defeated, wounded, and tired WindClan cats fleeing from their home. I'm filled with unexplainable anger as I bound after my flame pelted companion. The scent leads us to the far uplands.

Fireheart suggest stopping for a break and I sit and curl my tail

around my paws, catching my breath. "Do you think, Nightpelt is there yet?" Fireheart murmurs.

In a tunnel below Highstones lay the sacred Moonstone, where the leaders of each Clan shared dreams with StarClan. "I don't know, but let's not wait to find out." I mew and get up and suggest we move along.

We continue to follow WindClan's scent and come across mossy bedding underneath a bramble thicket. "They must have rested here," Fireheart mews and I nod. I continue along jumping over the ditch and onto a hard-red track.

Fireheart doesn't follow and I turn to look at him. He’s staring at a Twoleg structure. "What's up?" He finally looks at me and shakes his head. "Nothing, sorry, let's keep going." He jumps across to me and continues padding along. I look back at the structure with narrowed eyes before following Fireheart.

There's something he isn't telling me. I let it go but promise to find out later. He disappears through a hedge on the far side. I quicken my pace to follow him. The sun sets, the temperature plunged, and frost began to form on the grass.

"Should we keep going?" I ask. "What if the trail takes us to Highstones after all? Nightpelt will definitely be there by now."

Fireheart sniffs the air. "We'll keep going," He meows. "We'll stop when we have to." The breeze brought the scent of a thunderpath to my nose and my face scrunches up. Fireheart smells it too and we exchange a look. We push on until we come to the thunderpath.

The sound of monsters is deafening. We lost the scent with dismay and Fireheart’s worried we lost their trail. We continue moving, coming to a large Thunderpath that arches high into the air on massive stone legs, illuminated by the monster's eyes that move along it.

We pick up WindClan's scent again and are elated. "They must have settled somewhere near here," Fireheart mews in relief and we slink closer to the Thunderpath, watchful for WindClan's scent.

"Emberstep, if WindClan has settled so close to a Thunderpath, it seems their desperate not to be found. They might trust us more if we arrive in daylight. Not if we creep up on them in the darkness." I nod as his logic makes sense. "I agree we should rest here till sunhigh."

Fireheart nods and we take shelter in what seems to be a badger set. Every time a monster ran over us, sending grit and dirt down, I would tremble, hiding my head under Fireheart's chin. "It's okay, they don't know we're here and even if they did, they couldn't get to us." Fireheart's words sooth me and I eventually fall asleep.

Chapter 4: Back From The Dead

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I wake in the morning and stretch my legs. Fireheart yawns and I look at him curled up. I prod him in the ribs with my forepaw. He grunts and shakes his head, clambering to his paws. Suddenly a monster goes over us and I yowl in fear. Fireheart presses against me in comfort. I blink at him gratefully before pulling away from him. I duck my head down, not looking at him.

"I'll never get the stink of this place out of my fur for a quarter moon," I grumble in annoyance. Fireheart doesn't reply as he scratches behind his ear. My legs ache from sleeping on the cold hard ground, I stretch my legs again, working the stiffness out.

"Let's head to the other end of the tunnel. I think it might lead under another Thunderpath." Fireheart suggests and I nod and together we pad through the darkness. Before long we see light up ahead. We quicken our pace until we reach the end of the tunnel. We come up near the edge of a patch of barren dirty grass.

A fire burns in the middle of the grass with Twolegs sleeping around it. Dark outlines caught my eye that move back and forth in front of the flames. Cats! "Fireheart, we found them!" His eyes gleam with triumph.

"Let's go!" I meow with excitement. "Wait. We don't want to startle them."

"Then what do you suggest?" I ask, looking at the cats moving back and forth. Just then a Twoleg jolts up right and starts shouting at the ragged cats. The WindClan cats scatter. All caution forgotten. Fireheart and I race after them, trying to keep up.

One of the Twolegs staggers to his feet and looms in front of Fireheart, who froze in fear. Something shatters beside us and

something enters my side and I yowl in pain as hard-edge splinters enter my flank. I screech and blood seeps from my side.

Fireheart bites into the Twoleg's legs, slashing and clawing. He then races back to my side and pushes me past the Twoleg and we follow after the WindClan cats.

My fur stands on end, my tail flicking in fear. Pain floods my pelt but I ignore it. We charge into the safety of the shadows beneath the Thunderpath. Ahead, I see the WindClan cats stop close to one of the Thunderpath's great stone legs. And then one by one the cats disappear into the ground.

Fireheart turns to me searching my unwounded side. "Are you okay, I heard your yowl?" I don't want to lose the WindClan cats after we just found them. "Let's go, I'm good." Fireheart nods and we disappear into the tunnel after the WindClan cats.

We move through the darkness and soon we see the tunnel is lit by a narrow hole in the ceiling that leads to the wasteland above. I see many cats huddled together in the dim light. Warriors, elders, queens, kits, pitifully sitting around as if they weren't just chased by Twolegs.

A breeze brings the scent of sickness and crowfood to my nostrils. Fireheart takes a deep breath before stepping into the thin light, I stare at him with worry. A gray WindClan tom spins around, his fur standing on end as he yowls an alarm to the rest of the Clan.

In one smooth movement, the WindClan warriors form a line across the tunnel in front of the queens and elders, their backs arching, hissing fiercely. Dread fills me as they hiss. These cats are about to attack. I come out and press my unwounded side against Fireheart's.

A black and white tom pads out and sniffs the air, but the breeze carries our scent away from him. He moves closer to us and I keep my eyes down. The tom sniffs us before padding back to his warriors. "ThunderClan." At this the warriors fur flattens but they remain in their defensive line.

The leader sits and curls his tail around his paws. "Why are you

here?" He asks looking at us. "We came to find you," Fireheart replies. "Bluestar and the other Clan leaders want you to return home."

The WindClan leader still looks wary. "That land is not safe for my Clan anymore."

"ShadowClan has driven Brokenstar out. He's no longer a threat to your Clan," I meow through my pain. Murmurs ripple through the WindClan cats and Fireheart steps forward. "You must return as soon as possible." I step up beside him.

"RiverClan and ShadowClan have begun hunting the uplands. We saw a RiverClan hunting patrol near the old fox set while we were on our way here," I say and Tallstar bristles angrily. "But their poor hunters. I think they went home with empty bellies." Tallstar and his warriors purr with satisfaction.

"May we travel with you?" Fireheart suggest respectively. Tallstar's eyes flash as he stares steadily at Fireheart. "Yes. Thank you."

"This is Emberstep," He says and I dip my head respectively. "And I am Fireheart. We are warriors of ThunderClan."

"Fireheart," repeated Tallstar thoughtfully. Sunlight floods through the gap in the roof, making Fireheart's pelt glow in the dim tunnel. "The name suits you." Tallstar flicks his tail and the warriors behind him begin to split up. "Is everyone ready for the journey."

"Everyone except Morningflower's kit. He's too young," replies a mottled brown warrior. "Then we must take turns carrying him." Tallstar orders and I see a dark tortoishell queen holding a tiny kit gently by the scruff. Its eyes were hardly open.

We make our way out the way we came and Fireheart left my side to travel with the deputy to keep an eye out for trouble. I fall farther back due to the pain in my side. I end up beside the tortoishell queen holding her kit. She seems to be having trouble. "I'll take him, Moriningflower," A gray queen suggests. Morningflower looks at the she-cat before allowing her to take the kit from her jaws.

"He's beautiful," I meow to her and she turns her head to look at me. "I'm sure you'll have kits that are just as beautiful." I purr in thanks as we walk along. "How long have you been Fireheart's mate?" I stumble over my paws at her question. "We're not mates," I whisper to her as Fireheart's only a few fox lengths away checking on cats.

"We're close friends that's it." I tell her and Morningflower looks at me. "But you do care for him, I can tell by the way you look at him. He feels the same, if the way he looks at you is any consultation."

"That's ridiculous. He's-. . .he's in love with someone else." I murmur, looking down at my paws. Fireheart makes his way to the back of the group. Being reminded of his love for Spottedleaf gives me a pang in my chest. Not wishing to converse I pad past him to the front of the group next to a young brown tom.

I feel Fireheart's gaze burning into my pelt but I don't look back. The brown tom turns to look at me. "Hi, I'm Onewhisker." I meow a greeting. We slow down as the WindClan cats have a hard time keeping up the pace. When we make it to the hedge Fireheart and Morningflower catch up.

I see Morningflower taking her kit from Fireheart. "Tallstar we need to cross this Thunderpath in small groups."

"Me and Emberstep will stay with any that might need help," Fireheart addresses the Clan leader. "If that's okay with you, Tallstar," he adds. The black and white tom nods. "The strongest group will go first." The first group is led by Onewhisker. Fireheart and I watch for a gap in the monster speeding along.

"Now!" Fireheart yowls as a monster flashes past. They just barely got across. Then three more groups go across without incident. Then it's our turn.

We help the remaining elders across. The pain in my side causes me to stumble and fall behind the small group. When we we're almost to the other side I hear one of the warrior's yowl. "Look out!" I look up and see a monster hurtling towards the group.

The cats rush forward but I am slower going. I'm not going to make it! There's still an elder beside me, I look at the monster before shoving the elder forward out of the path of the beast. I look up at the monster, eyes wide as it hurtles closer, faster than a lightning strike.

🔥 Fireheart 🔥

I make it to the other side of the Thunderpath and sigh in relief. But when I look behind me, I still see Emberstep in the middle of the Thunderpath. I see the monster hurtling toward her. Without thinking I rush forward, racing across the Thunderpath.

I grab Emberstep by the scruff and drag her backwards, the monster suddenly swerves, avoiding us by a mouse length. Emberstep forces me to let go of her and races the rest of the way across the Thunderpath.

We make it to the other side, my flank heaving as I try to catch my breath. I turn to Emberstep but she's on the ground, not moving. "Emberstep?" I pad over to her, sniffing her pelt. Morningflower comes over and points to something with her tail.

"Blood!" I look and see the crimson liquid seeping out from under Emberstep's body. "But... the monster didn't hit us," I whisper and ask Deadfoot and Onewhisker to help me turn her over. They help me and what I see leaves me breathless. There were puncture wounds in her flank, blood matted her fur to her flank.

"This is from what the Twolegs threw at us. Why didn't I notice this? Why didn't you tell me?!" I ask her knowing I wouldn't receive an answer. Her eyes are closed, her flank heaving, blood seeping from her side. "Barkface!" Onewhisker calls and a brown tom with a short tail bounds toward us.

"Emberstep's hurt," Deadfoot tells him and Barkface inspects my orange companion. "Onewhisker, have your apprentice fetch me some cobwebs." The brown tom nodded and turned to his apprentice, I realize this must be WindClan's medicine cat. She nods and goes speeding off. She returns minutes later with cobwebs wrapped around her paw.

I watch Barkface press the cobwebs to Emberstep's flank. "That's all I can do for now, I wish we could find more herbs that might help. When we get back to the forest, I'll send out some apprentices to scout for what I'll need."

"She would have died for us, you could have died for us! WindClan will never forget this," Onewhisker murmurs, pressing his nose to mine before doing the same to Emberstep. Tallstar bounds forward beside Onewhisker. "Onewhisker is right; we shall honor you both in our stories. But we must keeping going. Who is strong enough to carry Emberstep?"

I step forward and speak, "I'll do it. She's my friend. Onewhisker will you help put her on my back?" The warrior nods and I crouch down. "Be careful of her side," Barkface whispers and Onewhisker nods before he and Deadfoot push her onto my back.

We begin to move again, I gingerly stand up, mindful of Emberstep's shifting weight. The Clan follows the hedgerow along the Thunderpath then turns to follow the path back to the woods. The battered WindClan cats were traveling slower than when we started.

When we reach the fence, I was fearful of how I was going to get Emberstep over that. And Many of the Clan were weak and couldn't get over by themselves. I crouch and slide Emberstep gently off my back.

She makes a small whimper and I feel sadness blossom in my chest. I nudge her gently with my nose, she barely moves in response. "Emberstep? I-I know you're hurt and weak but I need your help if I'm to get you over this fence. Please, try and stand."

Her eyes open a few inches and she looks at me. "Fireheart. . .I- I'll try," She whispers before attempting to stand, I help her. She staggers to the fence and looks up at it. She begins to climb and I help her up and over.

Once she hits the ground, she falls onto her unwounded side, her eyes closing. I return to the other side to help the weakest cats over. Then we continue on with our journey. Soon I could spot the

Twolegplace where the loner Barely lives and it's the place, we sent Ravenpaw.

I sniff the air but catch no scent of my small friend. A cold wind ruffles my fur, bringing the first drops of rain. I growl internally, there is no way these poor cats can make it through a long and wet night. They are tired and so am I, and I can tell that Yellowfang's herbs were wearing off as my stomach growls.

I call to Tallstar, feeling Emberstep murmur uncomfortably in her sleep. "Perhaps we should stop for the night, take shelter?"

"I agree. There's a ditch we can shelter in until sunrise." I shake my head scattering raindrops. "That's not the best idea. There are rats in these ditches. We'd be safer sheltering in the hedgerow," I suggest and Tallstar nods. "Very well." He calls to his Clan and tells them we're spending the night here.

I get ready to slide Emberstep off my back when the grass behind us rustles. The WindClan warriors get into attack positions and hiss fiercely, arching their backs, claws unsheathed. But I perk up and turn to face the visitor with a welcoming purr as the wind brings a familiar scent to me.

"Ravenpaw!" I purr as a sleek black cat emerges from the long grass. Ravenpaw races over to me and I rub my muzzle against his. "Thank StarClan your safe!"

"Firepaw!" Ravenpaw meows in delight. "It's Fireheart now, I'm a warrior!"

"Do you know this cat?" Snarls Deadfoot. I flinch at his hostility. "He can help us find food."

"Why would a loner help us?" Demands Deadfoot. "Loners have helped us before," I say calmly. Ravenpaw steps forward and bows his head respectively. "Let me help you, I owe my life to Fireheart, and if he's traveling with you, then you must be friends." He turns and bounds away to retrieve Barley.

I let Emberstep slide gracefully from my back and onto the grass.

"She needs to be out of the rain," Morningflower meows appearing at my shoulder. Morningflower grabs Emberstep by the scruff and gently pulls her into the brush, covered by leaves to keep as much of the rain off her pelt as possible. Morningflower lays with Emberstep and licks her head in a mother like gesture.

I purr my thanks and she dips her head in welcome. Emberstep, even though unconscious, she fidgets and makes noises. Morningflower whispers and tries to comfort her.

Chapter 5: Unnecessary Death

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I open my eyes and stand up, stretching my legs. I startle when I realize the pain in my side is gone. I crane my head and look to see there's no wound there. "What the?" I look around and recognize that I'm back in ThunderClan territory, a little way from Snakerocks.

I see a shape flash past me and my fur bristles. A flame pelted tom, with stars in his fur, dashes into the undergrowth after a squirrel. I freeze. . .Firestorm? I chase after the tom, my paws thudding on the ground. "Firestorm?!" I yowl as loud as I can and the tom skids to a halt, the squirrel forgotten.

He turns around and purrs loudly. He bounces toward me in delight. He presses his muzzle against mine, purring loudly. "Emberstep, I'm so happy to see you!" He suddenly pulls away and looks at me. "What are you doing in StarClan?"

I look at him eyes wide as moons. "I'm-I'm in StarClan? I-. . .I don't know I just woke up here. I was traveling with Fireheart to find WindClan and we found them. But I got wounded and now I'm here. I don't know how or why!"

"Because, I wanted you here." A voice spoke and I turn to see Spottedleaf padding towards us, the stars in her pelt making her look even more beautiful. I dip my head respectively to my former medicine cat. "Spottedleaf, it's a pleasure to see you again after all this time."

My father presses his nose to my shoulder before bounding away. Spottedleaf pads closer stopping in front of me and sitting down, curling her tail around her paws. "Emberstep, I had wished to speak with you."

"What is it, Spottedleaf?" I ask sitting as well, my tail flicking nervously. "I know of your feelings for Fireheart and why you are not acting on them." I stiffen and my ear flicks nervously, I shift my paws. "Um, I don't think that has anything to do with you."

"I think it does. I'll be having the same talk with him. Listen, young Emberstep. Fireheart may have had feelings for me and I for him but it was never going to happen. I was a medicine cat and he was a warrior. I had followed the Code to my last breath. We know that sometimes the Code should be broken for the right reasons but in this instance that is not the case."

I listen silently as she stands and moves beside me. "You and Fireheart deserve to be happy. You not sharing your feelings because of a love lost is not wise. It is time for Fireheart to move on and if that's with you then you both have my blessing." Spottedleaf stands and begins to walk away.

"May StarClan light your path," She whispers as she disappears and the forest around me begins to fade.

My body rocks and slides, waking me from my dream. I wait for my head to stop spinning. My flank throbs in pain and I open my eyes and look around. I'm in an abandoned Twoleg nest. Another cat lays beside me, I turn my head slightly and see Morningflower licking her kit's wet fur.

I look towards the opening of the Twoleg nest and see Fireheart talking with a sleek black cat. I narrow my eyes and focus on the stranger, he's not from WindClan. A cold breeze blew into the nest and brought the stranger's scent to me.

I freeze, the scent is as familiar as my own bedding. The stranger is none other than Ravenpaw, the shy cowering apprentice that Fireheart told me died on the Thunderpath chasing ShadowClan cats out of our territory and back into theirs.

My eyes narrowed into slits as anger fills me. Fireheart lied to me and the entire Clan. I push myself onto my paws. Morningflower looks at me. "Emberstep, you should be resting!" I shake my head looking at her. "Thanks for staying with me Morningflower, but I'm

done resting."

I turn and move toward the entrance of the Twoleg nest, where Ravenpaw and Fireheart spoke in hushed whispers. Fireheart notices my approach and stiffens. I brush past them and whisper, "Welcome back from the dead, Ravenpaw."

I pad into the rain and flatten my ears as rain pelted me. I broke into a run, ignoring the pain in my flank, I make it back to the hard red track from yesterday. "Emberstep, wait!" I hear Fireheart calling to me, I flick my tail showing I heard him but am choosing to ignore him.

"Emberstep, please!" His paw steps sounded behind me and I round on him, hissing with rage. "For what, Fireheart, huh? More lies, more deception. You lied to me, to the whole Clan, even Graystripe who's your best friend!"

Something flashes in Fireheart's eyes and I feel my heart break at the realization. "You-. . . you told Graystripe . . . but you didn't tell me. Who else did you tell Bluestar?" He makes the same face only worse and I feel my claws unsheathe.

Without thinking I rake my claws across his nose. He flinches from the attack but makes no move to retaliate. "For StarClan's sake Fireheart! Graystripe, my mother, why not tell my sister while you're at it! I see how little I mean to you, how little our friendship means to you. Well enjoy your time with him, maybe if you need someone to talk to he'll be all ears, or Graystripe, or my mother. But not me, don't talk to me ever again!!!"

I yowl at him feeling hurt and heartbroken. Fireheart's eyes are filled with sadness but I ignore it. "I hate you, Fireheart, I hate you!!!" I turn and jump across the ditch, my paws almost slipping on the mud, I glare and growl before taking off at a run.

I don't stop till I reach Highstones. The rain eased and the clouds start to disappear, showing the full moon. I see the entrance to Mother Mouth and creep into the cave and curl up, shivering.

"Emberstep. Wake up, young one. Wake up!" I open my eyes and

jolt to my feet, looking around in panic. "It's alright," a familiar she-cat whispers to me, I sigh and press my flank to hers. "Bluestar, I'm so happy to see you."

"Emberstep, where's Fireheart? Is he okay?!" I shake out my pelt and look away from her suddenly remembering why I had run away. "He's fine, so is WindClan. We found them, Bluestar." I spoke in a respective way not as if she were my mother, she picks up on my tone but says nothing.

"Why aren't you with them?" She asks gently and I start walking toward the direction of the forest. "Ravenpaw, gave us shelter and I was injured so I didn't see him until after I awakened."

"Who gave you shelter?" I hear a deep voice and see Tigerclaw appear from Mother mouth's cave. I feel a sense of unexplainable dread and felt the need to withhold the truth. "Um, Barely, the loner from when Bluestar took Fireheart to the Moonstone." Tigerclaw stares at me before nodding. "Alright, we don't have time to wait for the kittypet to catch up so let's head back to camp."

🔥 Fireheart 🔥

I feel dread fill me at Barkface's ominous words. "This day shall bring an unnecessary death." My mind flashes to Emberstep who had set off on her own and I had let her. My fur stands on end at the thought of anything bad happening to her because I let her go off on her own.

I'm thankful when the leader suggests we continue. I race ahead to scout for danger but our path is clear. The Twolegs had locked their dogs up and they bark furiously. The rain comes back as they push through the hedgerow and their pace quickens, they know where they are.

I feel slightly relieved as I sprint after them. We bound toward the slope that leads to the uplands, and their home. Even the elders quicken their pace and two apprentices' race ahead of me into the familiar heather. "Wait!" Tallstar suddenly yowls out, causing the rest of the Clan to stop and glance back at him with wide eyes.

I step up beside him realizing and sharing his concern. "There might be other Clans' hunting parties here. We need to proceed more cautiously," I meow and Tallstar nods and the apprentices bound back, licking their chest fur in embarrassment, their delight dimming slightly.

We move closer to the camp and we descend down the slope into camp. I sniff the air and am surprised to smell two familiar scents. The brush rustles and the WindClan warriors stiffen but soon relax when Emberstep and Graystripe slip out of the grass, holding moss.

"You're here! And you brought Graystripe!" My gray friend purred and set the moss ball he's carrying down. "She came back to camp with Bluestar and said she wanted to finish the quest she was given. It's what her father would have wanted. So we came here and gathered moss for bedding. herbs thanks to Yellowfang, and freshkill, thanks to Whitestorm, Runningwind, and Longtail."

WindClan looks at the freshkill pile and murmurs of surprise ripple through the group. "ThunderClan did this for us?" An apprentice asks and meows of gratitude rose up. Tallstar looks at me and Emberstep. "You both have proven you are warriors worthy of StarClan. My Clan is home and grateful for your help. Now it's time for you to return to yours. Deadfoot and Onewhisker will escort you to Fourtrees."

I bow my head, "Thank you, Tallstar."

🐾Emberstep🐾

I bow my head as well. "May StarClan light your path, Tallstar. Goodbye." Tallstar waves his tail in farewell.

We leave WindClan territory with Onewhisker, Deadfoot, Fireheart, and Graystripe. The ThunderClan warriors had already gone home before WindClan arrived. Fireheart suggested taking a shortcut home through the gorge.

I feel really tired and my legs ache. Suddenly a warning yowl rumbles in Deadfoot's throat. I freeze and sniff the air. A RiverClan patrol! I hear a screech and whip around to see six RiverClan

warriors racing towards us.

They outnumber us by one. I recognize Blackclaw and I growl ferociously. Blackclaw screeches in rage and slams into me. I feel the edge of the gorge with my hind leg, dying like that made my fur spike.

I hiss at him and claw at his muzzle. He claws at my flank and I yowl in pain as he tears open my old wound. I bite down hard on his foreleg and I don't let go. He tries desperately to rip his paw away from my teeth but that digs them in harder and he screeches in pain.

I clamp down harder before letting him go. I swipe at his flank before he retreats.
I see Fireheart being attacked by a dark brown warrior. I'm full of exhaustion and my vision blurs slightly. Before my vision went dark, I smell the approach of a ThunderClan patrol, Tigerclaw, Whitestorm, Willowpelt, and Sandpaw.

I find strength in their arrival and with the last of my fading strength I launch myself at the warrior on Fireheart and bit down on his shoulder.

He yowls and shakes throwing me off. My paws hit the ground then nothing. I slip and realize I'm on the edge of the gorge. I yowl in fear as I look at the white foaming fast moving water. The sandy wall of the gorge begins to crumble and my claws slip.

I screech and scramble to climb back up. "Emberstep!!" I feel teeth grab my scruff and haul me up. I push up with my hindlegs and we collapse on solid ground. A cat curls around me, pressing his muzzle into my fur. I hear an agonizing yowl and I lift my head up along with Fireheart.

Graystripe crouches at the edge of the gorge, looking down. I get up and slink closer with Fireheart and look down, a dark head sinks underneath the foaming water.

Everything else is a blur, the RiverClan cats left and we return to our Clan. The walk is silent and Fireheart's flank is pressed against

mine in a comforting gesture. I press my muzzle into Fireheart's fur, my mind flashing back to my almost shared fate with Whiteclaw.

Tigerclaw's patrol crosses into ThunderClan's territory and stops looking back. "I said follow me," He growled. "Graystripe was-" Fireheart began but is cut off. "The sooner Graystripe gets back to camp the better." Fireheart bristles at the senior warriors cold words. "Whiteclaw's death wasn't Graystripe's fault!"

"I know. But it's done. Let's get back to camp. Emberstep needs to get to the medicine cat den as soon as possible." Tigerclaw took off toward the camp.

I limp beside Fireheart on a familiar trail, before I know it I spot the camp entrance. When the patrol emerges from the gorse tunnel some of the Clan cats padded up their tails held high in greeting. "Did you find WindClan? Are they safe?" Mousefur calls and Fireheart nods absently.

Mousefur sees my flank and her eyes widen, her tail droops. The other cats hang back at the edge of the clearing. "Come with me," Tigerclaw orders Fireheart and Graystripe, heading towards Bluestar's den. Fireheart reluctantly pulls away from me, I'm about to follow when Willowpelt appears at my side and lays her tail across my back, leading me to Yellowfang's den.

I stumble into the medicine cat's den and Willowpelt calls to Yellowfang. "Emberstep is wounded!" Yellowfang slips out of the rock immediately. She pads closer and looks at my flank it's bleeding heavily. "I'm sure I left a blood trail in the forest." Yellowfang ignores my poor attempt at lightening the mood.

"Willowpelt, fetch me Chervil, cobwebs, comfrey, dock, oak leaves, and marigold!" She says to Willowpelt then turns to me. "You should not have fought when you already had this serious of an injury," She scolds and I blink at her.

"I didn't really have a choice. And Blackclaw didn't give me much of one," I hiss as my flank convulses in pain. Willowpelt slips into the rock and comes out carrying a bundle and cobwebs. I lay down as Yellowfang instructs me and she gets to work. Applying a poultice

to my flank and the scratches I received elsewhere.

Yellowfang looks into my eyes. "Willowpelt, fetch some thyme and poppyseeds." My former mentor nods and goes back to the rock and comes back with the herbs. Yellowfang grabs the thyme and rips it into strands. "Here this is for your anxiety and this," She says shaking out two poppy seeds, "is for sleep. You need it."

I obediently lick up the leaves and then the poppy seeds. I'm already exhausted from the journey and start to yawn as the poppy's work quickly. I curl up in a nest Yellowfang directs me too and fall into a deep sleep.

I felt a paw prodding me and open my eyes to see my former mentor. I purr in greeting at her kind face. "Ceremony!" I look at her in confusion. "What ceremony?" She flicks her tail, signaling for me to follow her. I get to my paws, shaking moss out of my pelt and enter the clearing.

The moon fills the clearing with silver light. I look up at Silverpelt and purr. "Well done, for bringing WindClan home!" Halftail calls and Fireheart jumps after just slipping out of the warriors den. Frostfur sat below the Highrock, I stare around confused.

Three kits sit with her, one smudgy gray, the other ginger, and the last one is white with gray markings. The white queen bends her head and licks her kits. Graystripe stands silently beside Fireheart and they stand near the Highrock.

I feel excitement as I realize Graystripe and Fireheart are getting their first apprentices. Bluestar meows a summon and Fireheart and Graystripe step toward my mother. "This moonhigh, we gather together to name three new apprentices. Come forward, you three."

The gray kit darts from her mother's side into the clearing, eyes wide with excitement. Amused purrs ripple through the Clan. The ginger kit follows more slowly into the clearing. The white kit stuck close with her brother.

"From this day forward," Bluestar meows, gazing down at the little gray kit, "until she has earned her warrior name, this apprentice

will be called Cinderpaw. Fireheart, I expect you to pass on everything I taught you to this apprentice."

Fireheart shifts nervously and Bluestar looks down on the ginger tom kit. "This apprentice will be known as Brackenpaw." Brackenpaw didn't make a sound nor move a muscle. "Graystripe, you will train Brackenpaw. Our lost friend Lionheart was your mentor. I hope his skill and wisdom will pass through you to your new apprentice."

I look at the last kit and search the clearing, trying to guess which warrior would get her. "And this apprentice will be known as Rainpaw until she has earned her warrior name," Bluestar meows gazing at the white kit, "Emberstep, Willowpelt was your mentor and I hope you pass on the skills she taught you to your new apprentice!"

I jump as Bluestar calls my name and I look up at her, pride fills my mother's eyes. I look at the tiny she-kit and feel my own pride and excitement fill me. I pad to stand next to Fireheart. I step forward and touch noses with Rainpaw, she looks up at me with a happy gleam in her eyes.

Bluestar jumps down from the Highrock and pads over to me. "Once your healed and ready you can begin training her. I'm very proud of you, my dear." I thank her and she returns to her den. I look at Rainpaw and purr.

"We'll take a tour of the territory. When I'm better we'll start with hunting techniques." Rainpaw nods and scampers over to her mother. I feel a dull pain in my side and return to the medicine cat's den. I curl up in my nest and close my eyes.

I open my eyes and feel a warm body curled up beside me. I look and see Fireheart purring softly in his sleep. His position reminded me of how we curled up under the Thunderpath. I think back to my trip to StarClan and my talk with Spottedleaf.

Then I remember his lies about Ravenpaw and how he told the cats close to him but me. I look and see the sun has not risen yet. I curl back up next to Fireheart and close my eyes.

I feel Fireheart shift and curl around me, his neck and muzzle resting on my shoulders. I accept his warmth and purr quietly before going to sleep.

Chapter 6: The Truth Hurts

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

"Emberstep," A hoarse mew wakes me up. I open my eyes and see Yellowfang. "What is it, Yellowfang?"

"Your apprentice has awoken and you said you were taking her on a tour of the territory." I jump to my paws, noticing the empty space beside me. Fireheart is no longer there and I feel a little anger that he hadn't woken me and sadness that he actually left.

I leave the medicine cat den and slip into the clearing. Fireheart and Cinderpaw were talking. He looks up and notices me. "Hey, Emberstep," He says almost without feeling like we weren't best friends. My ears flatten at his tone, I flick my tail angrily and stalk away to find my apprentice.

"Rainpaw!" I call and she pops her head out of the apprentice's den. "Do you want to eat before we go?"

"I'm too excited to eat," She says bouncing out of the den. I purr in amusement and flick my tail. "Then let's go, we'll go to the sandy hollow first and make our way from there." We walk side by side towards the camp entrance. "Emberstep, do you think we could travel with you and Rainpaw?"

I look at Cinderpaw as she skidded beside me in her excitement, jumping up and down on her paws. I glare at Fireheart before addressing his apprentice. "Sure, Cinderpaw, if you want to learn the most you might want to listen to me," I mew and Fireheart flinches.

"Let's go, Rainpaw." We pad out of camp and up the ravine with Fireheart behind us. We make our way to the sandy hollow. "This is where you will spend most of your time training, Rainpaw. I'll teach you some hunting techniques tomorrow then after that I'll teach you

battle moves."

I turn in the direction of Sunningrocks, hitting Fireheart with my tail in the process. I chat with my apprentice comfortably as we arrive at Sunningrocks. "In Greenleaf this is one of the best places to come and sun, also it's a great place for hunting. Now smell the air, what do you smell?"

Rainpaw and Cinderpaw lift their muzzles and inhale. "Fish and cats." I crouch down to Rainpaw's level. "That my apprentice is RiverClan, remember it. But you might get acquainted with it sooner than I wish."

"Emberstep, will we enter war with RiverClan because of Graystripe?" I narrow my eyes at Cinderpaw. "Who told you that?" I say calmly with a hidden storm brewing underneath. "Tigerclaw, when he was talking with Bluestar." I share a look with Fireheart before turning back to his apprentice.

"First off, don't eavesdrop, it's disrespectful. Second, don't listen to anything that flea brain says he's wrong. It's not Graystripe's fault, it's half RiverClan's. The gorge was a mouse brained place to attack and they knew that. Now let's head to the Owl tree," I say flicking my tail in that direction. The two apprentices bounded away in excitement.

I follow them at a slower pace and Fireheart walks beside me. "Thanks for saying that."

"I didn't do it for you. I did it for Graystripe." I say, keeping my tone plain. "Why are you so angry at me, I thought we were fine during the apprentice ceremony?" I look at him, ears flat, tail flicking. "If you don't know why I'm angry then this isn't even worth discussing. Excuse me," I say stalking after my apprentice.

"Rainpaw, we'll be leaving Cinderpaw and Fireheart here. He wants to show Cinderpaw the hunting crouch, we'll continue the tour." Cinderpaw looks at Fireheart excitedly and Rainpaw nods respectfully. "Okay, Emberstep, I know you still need to heal. Where will we go next."

I purr at the understanding in Rainpaw's eyes. "We'll head back to camp after we visit Tall Pines. Tomorrow I'll show you the Great Sycamore." Rainpaw nods and we pad in the direction of Tall Pines, leaving Fireheart and Cinderpaw behind.

After Tall Pines we make our way back to camp. On the way there Rainpaw caught a squirrel twice her size and I caught a thrush and vole. I am so proud, she didn't even need me to show her the hunting crouch. I slip through the camp entrance and into the clearing.

Graystripe sat with his apprentice talking. The Clan sees the squirrel in Rainpaw's jaws and surprise ripples through the Clan. "Did you catch that Rainpaw?" The little white apprentice nods, nearly tripping over her catch. I set my prey down. "I didn't even teach her the hunting crouch yet! She's a natural born hunter!"

The Clan mews in approval and congratulations. I have Rainpaw take her catch to the elders and I put my prey on the fresh kill pile. Soon Fireheart and Cinderpaw come back and it is Sunhigh.

The Clan starts to eat and then begin sharing tongues. I ate a vole and Rainpaw ate a smaller squirrel. I watch Fireheart and Graystripe sharing tongues, I glare at the flame pelted warrior. "I'm going to go hunt, see you tomorrow, Rainpaw."

"Good luck hunting!" The little apprentice calls and I flick my tail. I slink past Fireheart and Graystripe on my way out.

🔥 Fireheart 🔥

I watch Emberstep stalk by us on her way out of camp. "For the love of StarClan, Fireheart just talk to her!" I look at Graystripe. "I don't even know what she's mad about! I thought everything was better between us after the apprentice ceremony."

"Listen up mouse brain, she's obviously still upset about the whole Ravenpaw not being dead thing. I don't blame her either, you told me and Bluestar before she even found out about it. I'd be pretty furious too. Just tell her why you had to keep it a secret, tell her the truth."

"All of it?" I ask my gray friend. "All of it." I nod and decide to talk to her tonight.

🐾Emberstep🐾

I hunted till the sun went down and brought all my prey back, but by the time I was done, my side began to ache. I caught a rabbit, thrush, squirrel, sparrow, and two voles. After I placed them on the freshkill pile, I went out again. Not to hunt but to think. I make my way to Sunningrocks and lay down on the cool slab of rock. I look up at Silverpelt. I lay my head down on my paws.

'Spottedleaf, what should I do?' I silently ask the former medicine cat, but got no answer. The stars are as silent as. . .stars.

I hear pawsteps coming from the bracken but I ignore them. I could scent who it was and I had nothing to fear from a former kittypet. The fire pelted tom jumps up on the rock and sits next to me.

"What do you want?" I hiss and look at him but he didn't reply, just stares up at the stars. After a few heartbeats he speaks. "I miss our friendship, Emberstep. I miss talking to you, I miss you." I push myself to my paws and into a sitting position. "You should have thought about that when you lied to me and the Clan."

"I had my reasons for lying, Emberstep." I shake my head and go silent. "If I didn't help Ravenpaw escape and tell the Clan he was dead, he would have been murdered."

I freeze and look at him in confusion and disbelief. "Who? Who would have murdered him?" I whisper looking at him. "Tigerclaw. Ravenpaw witnessed him murder Redtail and Tigerclaw knew. He was making life for Ravenpaw miserable."

"Why would Tigerclaw murder Redtail?"

"So, he could become deputy."

"But he wasn't made deputy that was my father," I tell Fireheart. "Yeah but he is now. He's trying to claw his way up to power. And none of us want that to happen. Not Graystripe, me, or Ravenpaw."

"That's why you couldn't tell me but you could tell Graystripe?!" I questioned still feeling angry and untrusted. "Ravenpaw confided in Graystripe and me only and asked us not to tell anyone."

"But you told my mother! Before even coming to me!"

"I was worried because she was the leader and I was afraid Tigerclaw would harm her. Not that he needed to." I look at him and asked my final question. "So, if Ravenpaw hadn't shown up that night. . .would you have told me at all."

He didn't meet my eyes and I felt my lip curl. "You wouldn't have! Because you can't trust me with something so important!!" He tries to speak and I growl at him causing him to flinch. "After Bluestar I bet you would have told Yellowfang or if she was alive Spottedleaf. You would have trusted her enough to share this secret with, then again you might have told her before ShadowClan came into our camp. Because Spottedleaf is more than I'll ever be," I hiss revealing my jealousy of the beautiful dapple she-cat.

Fireheart's eyes widened and I turn away from him running into the forest. I yowl my anger into the darkness, scaring whatever prey is left back into their holes. I stop at the Great Sycamore and pace the forest floor growling. I dig my claws into the ground angrily.

Once my anger subsided all that's left is sadness. I curl up under a bramble bush feeling more alone than ever. He trusts my mother more than he trusts me, he can trust his best friend more than he can trust me. Our friendship died when I spotted Ravenpaw.

I pad back to camp, tail drooping. I trudge up the ravine and down to the camp entrance. I slip into the clearing and enter the warriors den. Fireheart wasn't there which made me happier. I curl up and go to sleep.

Chapter 7: I Trust You

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I wake up to sunlight filtering in. I get up and stretch before entering the clearing. Rainpaw is eating with Cinderpaw and Brakenpaw. I grab a chaffin from the fresh kill pile. I eat it in a few ravenous bites and call Rainpaw to me. The little apprentice mews goodbye to her littermates before bouncing over to me.

I purr and lick the top of her head. "Come, I'll be teaching you some battle techniques today. I think you've perfected your hunting crouch." Rainpaw purrs and we walk out of camp. I wish Fireheart would just trust me, I'm sure he'd say he trusts me but the truth about Ravenpaw doesn't prove it.

I don't think we'll ever be friends again, not if he can't trust me. I pad to the sandy hollow and I sit and wait for Whitestorm, Rainpaw and Sandpaw are supposed to train today. It felt weird being a warrior before my sister and getting an apprentice before she's even a warrior.

I hope she doesn't resent me for it. Whitestorm appears with Sandpaw, entering the hollow. "Whitestorm, hello, and hello Sandpaw." Sandpaw dips her head to me and looks at Rainpaw.

"Let's practice basic attacks, what to do if an opponent pins you." I suggest and Whitestorm nods. Rainpaw and Sandpaw face off against each other. "Remember claws sheathed." They nod and I watch silently, tail curled around my paws.

I see Graystripe and Fireheart enter the hollow from the corner of my eye. I ignore them as Whitestorm tells our apprentices to begin their mock battle. Sandpaw is supposed to pin Rainpaw, it's Rainpaw's job to get free.

Sandpaw slams into Rainpaw, knocking her over. The little

apprentice staggers to her paws, disoriented. Sandpaw jumps onto her back pinning her to the sandy ground. Rainpaw struggles and I will her to remember what I told her.

The white-and-gray apprentice goes limp and Sandpaw loosens her hold on her. Rainpaw surges upward throwing Sandpaw off her, she turns on the bigger apprentice and pounces on her. Pummeling her stomach with her claws sheathed.

After a few moments Rainpaw backs away from Sandpaw. I purr in approval and pride. "Good job, Rainpaw! Sandpaw your great too. How's her training been going, Whitestorm?" The older warrior turns to me. "It's been going great, her fighting skills could do with improvement though."

"Well, I'm sure Rainpaw would gladly work more with her. They'll get their together." I see Sandpaw get to her paws, her tail flicking as she listens to the conversation. "Let's try that again, Rainpaw this time you pin Sandpaw. Sandpaw you have to try and escape and counter attack. Remember claws sheathed."

Sandpaw flicks her ear to show she's listening. Rainpaw looked at Sandpaw, a happy gleam in her eye, I could tell she is fizzing with excitement. I purr in amusement and tell them to begin. Rainpaw lunges at Sandpaw swiping her paws out from under her and pouncing on her, pinning her to the ground.

Sandpaw goes limp immediately, Rainpaw thinking she's giving up, loosens her grip on the bigger apprentice. Sandpaw, kicks her hind leg out knocking Rainpaw off her. The white apprentice hits the ground and Sandpaw pounces on her pummeling her like Rainpaw did to her.

Suddenly Rainpaw starts to screech in pain. I see Sandpaw's claws are unsheathed, I race forward and swipe at Sandpaw's head, knocking her off Rainpaw. I turn to my apprentice and see she's bleeding heavily from claw marks on her flank.

I turn on Sandpaw and growl at her. "Sandpaw, you hurt a fellow Clanmate. I told you claws sheathed!" I screech at her and she looks up at me. "I forgot."

"That is a weak excuse. I said before you even began this round that claws were to be sheathed you did this on purpose!! I will speak to Bluestar about this."

"Oh, just stop! You think you're better than me because you're a warrior. You're not you're worse than me. You're worse than the kittypet you befriended!" With my claws sheathed I hit her across the head, full force, knocking her down again.

I pin her down and snarl in her face. "I am not better than you. But at this moment I am because I did not harm my Clanmate in a pathetic act of a petty apprentice!!" I turn to Whitestorm and get off Sandpaw. "Make sure to punish her. I have to take my apprentice back for treatment."

Tears stung my eyes at my sister's words. Graystripe bounds over to me. "I'll take her back if you want me too, Emberstep?" I blink gratefully at him, pressing my nose to his. I look and see Fireheart wasn't where I last saw him, I can hear yelling behind me and turn around.

Fireheart glares at Sandpaw, but stands calmly. "You're wrong, Sandpaw. Emberstep isn't better than you because she's a warrior, she's better than you because instead of you she's selfless, caring, loyal, courageous and unafraid to risk her life for her family and to do the right thing. That's what makes Emberstep better than you. You shouldn't be jealous of her, you should be proud like your mother is of both of you, like me and Graystripe are proud of her."

Sandpaw hung her head in shame and Fireheart mews something quieter to Whitestorm. I look at the Clan cat I had been so cold to, sticking up for me, defending me, even when I don't deserve his kind words. I feel shame flood my pelt at my attitude toward him this past moon.

I call to Brakenpaw and lead him back to camp after his mentor. After we enter the clearing, Bluestar comes toward me. "Is it true? Was it Sandpaw?"

"Yes, Mother, she was holding on to some aggression toward me and it got away from her." Bluestar's eyes sadden and she presses

against me. "I'll talk to her."

"Someone already did that," I say as Fireheart slips into camp with Whitestorm and a discouraged Sandpaw behind him. I decide to forgive him for hiding the truth from me, his reasons were good and his heart was well placed. Bluestar purrs and I look at her.

"I expect grandkits," I lick my chest fur in embarrassment. "Bluestar, I don't even think he likes me in that way." Bluestar rubs her muzzle with mine. "Just go, I'll check with Yellowfang about Rainpaw's condition." I nod and head over to Fireheart.

He looks at me and dips his head respectively. I wave my tail in greeting. "Can we talk later? It's important."

He looks at me and nods. "Of course. Sunningrocks?" I nod and go to Yellowfang's den and see Rainpaw sleeping in one of the nests. She had cobwebs on her flank and a poultice. Yellowfang sat in the middle of the den, sorting herbs.

"How is she?" I ask sniffing her cautiously. "She'll be running around the forest in no time. This wound won't dampen that excitement she has." I sigh and lay down beside her, I lick the top of her head. "I'll come back to check on her later." Yellowfang nods her head.

I leave her den and Fireheart rushes over to me. "Before we talk, I want to show you something." I stare at him before nodding and he leads me out into the forest. After a while I have no clue where we're going then I notice we're close to Tall Pines.

"Fireheart, where are you taking me." He turns to me and gives me a pleading look. "I know I don't deserve it but just trust me, please." I give him a serious look. "I trust you with my life, Fireheart." Hope fills the orange tom's eyes and he moves through the forest. We stop a few fox lengths from Twolegplace. I wait as Fireheart disappears into the brush.

After what seems like moons, I finally hear him coming back. He comes out of the brush and what I see makes my heart stop, Fireheart is with a light brown tabby with a white chest and paws. Her belly is swollen with kits. Thoughts race through my mind, are

they Fireheart's kits?!! Is he really having kits with a kittypet??!

I keep my face neutral and calm. "What in StarClan's name is this? Fireheart, if you tell me this kittypet is your mate. . .I don't know what I'll do. It's worse than taking a cat from another Clan!" Fireheart's eyes widen and he shakes his head. "No, Emberstep, this is my sister!"

I sigh and relax slightly. "Thank StarClan. So, this. . .is your sister?" He nods and the kittypet seemed to relax at my non-threatening posture. "My name is Princess. Fireheart has told me all about you in his visits."

"Good things I hope," I say sitting down, curling my tail around my paws. "Oh, yes, he speaks very high of you. Almost every time he comes, we talk about you and the Clans." I look at Fireheart with curiosity, he fidgets his paws.

"I also talk about Bluestar, Graystripe, and my apprentice." I purr in amusement. "Wait do they know about, Princess?"

"No, I told you first because I trust you."

"Oh, I think he not only trusts you but respects you," Princess chimes in and Fireheart nudges her gently. "Sorry, Fireheart." I stare at Fireheart for a moment longer than necessary to make him feel uncomfortable. "I like her," I say finally and Princess purrs.

I hear a Twoleg calling and Princess turns in that direction. "I have to go, bye Fireheart. Bye, Emberstep!" She presses her cheek to Fireheart's before racing away. I look at him after she's gone. "So, you have a sister, nice." I turn and head to Sunningrocks. "Are you mad at me, Emberstep?"

"I'm not mad, Fireheart. Just the opposite."

"Really?" He asks chasing after me to catch up. I purr and nod as he walks beside me. "I heard what you said today in the sandy hollow. I didn't deserve it." I meow truthfully and jump over a log. "Of course, you deserved it. And I meant every word I said. You are kind, loyal, and selfless. I couldn't imagine anyone else that's like

you."

I look back at him as he jumps over the log. "Do you really mean that Fireheart?" I ask him, looking into his dark green eyes. "I do, with all my heart." We stare at each other for a moment before I turn and lead the way to Sunningrocks.

I jump onto the slab and watch Fireheart jump up beside me. I look up at Silverpelt and he presses himself against me. "Emberstep, there's one more thing I'd like to share with you."

I look up at him with my light green eyes and look into his dark green ones. "I-. . . I love you." I forgot how to breath for a few heartbeats. A purr erupts from my throat. I wound my body around his, he purrs and nuzzles my head. "I love you too." We spend the night together in the shelter of Sunningrocks.

Chapter 8: She'll Never Be A Warrior

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I wake up and stretch, leaving the warriors den. Fireheart is on dawn patrol so he should be back near sunhigh. We have been mates for a quarter moon. Leaf-bare is setting in and rocking the forest. I look and see Rainpaw cleaning out the elders bedding, the claw marks on her side healed but left a scar. "Rainpaw, where's Sandpaw?"

The white apprentice looks up at me, a little fear at the mention of her sandy colored Clanmate. "She's still sleeping, along with Swiftpaw and Dustpaw." I growl at the news that my sister is still sleeping.

"You’re not going to clean the elders bedding by yourself!" I hiss before stalking to the apprentice den. I poke my head in and see Sandpaw, Swiftpaw, and Dustpaw curled up among the warm bedding.

I hiss loudly and the three apprentices jump to their paws. "Oh, you’re up, when it's nearly sunhigh. Go clean the elders bedding with Rainpaw."

"But Longtail is supposed to take me out to train!" Swiftpaw whines and I narrow my eyes at him. "Then you shouldn't have slept so late! Besides I'm sure all your mentors will understand, now all of you go! Check them for ticks as well then you can all go hunting. Leaf-bare has started to set in and we need as much prey as possible."

The two toms hiss and grumble in annoyance, but Sandpaw dips her head and walks out of the den. An amused meow sounds behind me. I back out and turn around to see Whitestorm. "Your starting to

sound like a true warrior, Emberstep. I hope you rub off on Sandpaw."

"Thanks, Whitestorm. That means a lot to me. I just try to be like Firestorm."

"Your father was a great warrior. You're doing just fine." Whitestorm turns and pads away. The camp entrance rustles and Runningwind, Willowpelt, Cinderpaw, and Fireheart slip into the clearing and I purr. I bound toward my flame colored mate and press against him, winding my way around him.

He purrs happy to see me; his eyes show exhaustion but excitement. "Hey, how is everything in camp?"

"It's good. The elders bedding is being changed. We're bringing back more food after each hunt. We may survive leaf-bare yet!" I mew excitedly but Fireheart seems distracted. "What's wrong, Fireheart? Are you okay?"

"Have you seen Graystripe?" The long-haired gray tom had fallen into the frozen river while Fireheart was trying to teach the apprentices how to hunt, Graystripe had darted after a water vole and fell through the ice, nearly drowning, and having to be saved by a silver grey RiverClan warrior.

"Last time I saw him he was headed for the nursery. He went behind it, I assumed he wanted to have some peace and quiet."

"Yeah, that's what I thought but now I think Graystripe's been sneaking out of camp to meet someone in RiverClan territory."

"What that's ridiculous. Graystripe would never do that, it goes against the warrior code. We may have friendships from other Clans, but our loyalty must remain with our Clan, as one day you may meet them in battle," I say reciting the code from memory. Fireheart looks at me in quiet amusement.

"My father was deputy, he basically told the warrior code to me as a story before I fell asleep."

"I want to follow Graystripe; can you cover for me?" I press my

cheek to his. "Of course, I will, fur brain. Go." He purrs before disappearing behind the nursery. Cinderpaw slips out of Dirtplace and looks around. "Hey, where did, Fireheart go? He was supposed to take me and Brackenpaw hunting!"

"I'll take you," I meow and look at how glum Brackenpaw looks as he had been in camp most of the day. "Rainpaw! We're going hunting." The white-and-gray apprentice is lying in a patch of weak sunlight and jumps to her paws.

I keep my whiskers from twitching in amusement. I head out of camp and into the forest, Cinderpaw, Brackenpaw, and Rainpaw all had their warrior assessments and did very well. I was impressed with Rainpaw, she showed very much intelligence and caught three thrushes and two water voles. We return to camp with a very good amount of prey.

Rainpaw caught a squirrel, Brackenpaw a wood mouse, vole, and chaffin, and Cinderpaw caught a sparrow and a raven. We needed all the prey we can get. By the time we were close to camp rain began to fall, all three apprentices scamper toward the ravine.

I sniff the air, thinking I caught the scent of Fireheart. But after scanning the woods and finding no sign of him, I return to camp, and drop my prey off. I grab Cinderpaw's sparrow and Brackenpaw's chaffin and take it to the Elder's den. The elders purr their thanks.

I slip into the warriors den and see Graystripe already curled up but Fireheart isn't with him. I curl up beside him and close my eyes. I hear pawsteps outside and open my eyes to see a discouraged Fireheart, holding a mouse.

"Yellowfang hasn't eaten today," a voice spoke, Whitestorm appears from the shadows. I feel slightly guilty that I didn't take her anything before going to bed. "I think she would appreciate that mouse you're carrying." Fireheart nods and backs out of the den carrying the mouse toward Yellowfang's den.

Whitestorm slips into the den and notices I'm awake. "Did I wake you, Emberstep?" I shake my head, using my hind leg to scratch at

my ear. "I heard Fireheart come in from his late hunting, thought I'd say hello. I should have taken something to Yellowfang."

"Hey, you're making sure the Clan is well fed and looking after the elders and your apprentice. You're doing quite well for yourself, don't beat yourself up over it." I nod and set my head on my paws, closing my eyes.

I woke up in the morning to find most of the Clan staring at Bluestar's den. I heard she had whitecough, but why is everyone so worried. Frostfur bursts out of Bluestar's den and races into the fern tunnel that leads to the gray medicine cat.

She comes back out with Yellowfang and rushes back to the Highrock, Fireheart stands beside the lichen and Frostfur whispers something to him and he nods.

I race up to the rock and Fireheart stands in my way. "What's going on? Let me through," I say urgently, I sneeze interrupting my next sentence. "You can't go in, Bluestar has greencough." I stare at him in dismay and sit down.

A yowl just outside the camp makes us turn and look toward the gorse tunnel. Dustpaw explodes into the clearing and skids to a halt beside me and Fireheart. "I've come from, Tigerclaw," he pants heavily. "I have a message for Bluestar."

"She's sick," Fireheart replies. "You can't go in." Dustpaw flicks his tail impatiently. "Tigerclaw needs to see her at the Thunderpath. It's very urgent!"

"What's wrong?" Dustpaw glares at him. "Tigerclaw asked for Bluestar," he sneers. "Not some kittypet pretending to be a warrior!" Fury fills me and it didn't sit well with Fireheart either cause he unsheathes his claws. "Bluestar can't leave camp," he growls.

He flattens his ears and moves so he's blocking the entrance to Bluestar's den. "Fireheart is right." Yellowfang's rough meow sounds behind him as she slides from Bluestar's den. Dustpaw looks at the medicine cat and shrinks under her orange gaze.

"Tigerclaw has found evidence of ShadowClan warriors in our territory," he meows. "They've invaded our hunting grounds!"

Fireheart's lip curls in anger and well earned. After all we've done for them! Yellowfang paid no attention to the young apprentice's report and instead turns to Fireheart. "Fireheart, tell me, do you know whether there is any catnip in the Twolegplace?"

"Catnip?" Fireheart echoes and I listen carefully, feeling hope stir in my chest. "I need it for Bluestar," Yellowfang explains. "It's an herb I haven't used for moons, but I think it will help her." Yellowfang has Fireheart's full attention now.

"It has soft leaves and an irresistible scent... -" Fireheart interrupts her with an eager look. "Yes, I know where to find some!" I jump to my paws at the news. "Good. I need as much as you can carry and fast."

"What about, Tigerclaw?" Dustpaw demands and I feel annoyance fill me. "Tigerclaw will just have to deal with it himself for the moment," I hiss at the apprentice, ShadowClan's the last thing on my mind at the moment. Cinderpaw had been listening and watching from the tree stump and bounds up to us. "Deal with what by himself?" Fireheart signals her to be quiet with a flick of his tail. Dustpaw ignores her.

"ShadowClan could be in our territory by now!" he hisses.

I thought for a moment before asking, "Where's Whitestorm?"

"Patrolling Sunningrocks with Sandpaw and Mousefur," Dustpaw answers. Yellowfang nods. "With Bluestar sick and Fireheart fetching catnip, we can't risk sending out any more warriors out of camp. If ShadowClan is in our territory, they might attack here. They've done it before," She reminds the apprentice grimly.

"If I'm quick getting back to camp, I could meet Tigerclaw and bring back his message for Bluestar." Dustpaw's eyes flash. "But he wants Bluestar to see the evidence for herself."

I finally snap at the apprentice. "She doesn't need to see the

evidence; the word of her deputy should be enough. We're wasting too much valuable time arguing about this!"

"I'll tell Tigerclaw that Bluestar just couldn't come." Fireheart meows. "I'll take the message to him after I've brought the catnip back here. Where is he?"

"I'll go," spat Dustpaw, who's wearing my patience thin. "You think you're a better messenger than me because you're a warrior and I'm just an apprentice?" He throws Fireheart a look of pure hatred, Yellowfang has no time or patience for quarrels. "The Clan will need protecting while Fireheart is gone!" She hisses at Dustpaw, flattening her ears.

"Isn't that duty important enough for you? Now where is Tigerclaw?"

"Beside the burned ash tree that overhangs the Thunderpath," Dustpaw replies sulkily. Yellowfang sends Fireheart away and he races across the clearing. I look after him before looking at my mother's den.

I turn to Yellowfang. "Will Bluestar be okay?" The flat faced gray medicine cat looks at me. "I don't know, Emberstep. Sometimes if a wound is severe enough StarClan can't heal it and they won't come back."

Yellowfang's words turned my blood to ice. Yellowfang goes back into Bluestar's den and I stay in the clearing. I hear pawsteps stop beside me and a pelt press against mine. I accept Rainpaw's comfort.

It isn't long before Fireheart came bursting into camp, carrying leaves in his mouth. I can smell the tantalizing scent from where I am. He rushes into the fern tunnel and seconds later Yellowfang comes rushing out with the leaves and into Bluestar's den.

Fireheart burst from the fern tunnel and raced to the apprentice's den. He sticks his head in. "Where's Cinderpaw?" I hear Brackenpaw's sleepy confused mew. "Uh, what?"

"Cinderpaw! Where is she!!"

"I don't know." Fireheart backs out looking worried. He rushes to the warriors den and pokes his head in only to come out looking even more agitated and furious. I rush over to him and give him a questioning look.

"What is it?"

"Graystripe's not here! When I need him the most, he's off with that retched RiverClan cat!" My eyes widened he had neglected to tell me that Graystripe, really is seeing a cat from another Clan. "Wait, what?!"

Fireheart gives me an apologetic look. "Sorry, I forgot to tell you. I'll give you full details later. I have to get to Tigerclaw but I can't babysit Cinderpaw on the way. Can you search for her while I meet Tigerclaw?" I nod and we head for the camp entrance.

I sniff on the way up the ravine and catch Cinderpaw's scent. She has gone to meet Tigerclaw herself, foolish apprentice! I share this with Fireheart and he looks very angry. We skirt Snakerocks and I begin to smell the Thunderpath and hear the roaring of the monsters.

Suddenly a shrill, high-pitched squeal sounds from the edge of the trees. We race out of the trees and skid to a halt on the grass border beside the Thunderpath. Fireheart looks up and down before spotting the burned ash tree Dustpaw told us about.

But the deputy was still some distance away, padding calmly toward the ash. Fireheart ran up to the ash and I followed him. "Did you hear that cry?" Fireheart called out only to be drown out by a passing monster.

I notice something beside the ash, a dark shape on a thin strip of grass. I realize who it is with a sickening jolt. It's Cinderpaw! Fireheart stares in pure horror at the limp body of his apprentice.

Tigerclaw looks down at Cinderpaw, his shoulders rigid with shock. Fireheart crouches and inches closer, sniffing her flank. One of her

hind legs is twisted and glistening with blood. Fireheart's body shook as he looks at his apprentice. "She's alive," the deputy growls and I glare at him.

"What was she doing here?!"

"She came to find you," my mate whispers. "You mean you sent her here?" My eyes widen in surprise and my tail flicks angrily. "No! I told her to stay in camp! She came by herself." Tigerclaw snorts and I feel like clawing his ear. "We must get her home."

He starts to bend his head down, mouth open. Once I realize what he's doing, I step forward and gently pick up the gray apprentice. I don't want you touching her, I think to myself, glaring at the tabby warrior.

Darkstripe came bounding up to us. "I checked Snakerocks again, Tigerclaw there's no sign of Shadow-" He broke off when he saw Cinderpaw dangling from my mouth. "What's happened?" I don't wait to hear Tigerclaw's reply and stumble through the trees with Fireheart beside me. I carefully carry this poor apprentice home. Yellowfang wasn't in her clearing.

I lay Cinderpaw down on the ground while Fireheart makes a nest for her. When he is done, I gently grab Cinderpaw by the scruff and carefully pull her inside. "Fireheart?" I hear Yellowfang's rasping mew from the clearing. "She's in here," Fireheart calls and he hops out of the nest. "Let me look," she brushes past Fireheart and into the bracken to examine Cinderpaw.

I pad over to him and press against him. Finally, Yellowfang jumps out. "She's hurt very badly. But I think I might be able to save her. I can't promise anything." She finishes and I feel Fireheart tense slightly. "Bluestar is very sick and I can do no more for her. StarClan must decide her fate now."

At the mention of my mother's condition, I feel tears in my eyes. "Both of you go and sit with Bluestar. She was asking for you earlier. I will take care of Cinderpaw." Fireheart and I turn away and head towards the fern tunnel.

Tigerclaw is sitting at the entrance to Yellowfang's den, head held high as usual. I want to claw his ears, he didn't show a hint of sorrow for the poor apprentice. From what I saw Cinderpaw got hurt for nothing. There was no evidence of ShadowClan fresh-kill.

Fireheart stalks past Tigerclaw without a word, I flick my tail hitting the warrior across the face and move along. I hear his growl as a reaction but ignore him. Longtail is sitting guard outside of Bluestar's den. He glances sideways but doesn't try to stop us as we push through the lichen.

Goldenflower one of the queens, mate to Tigerclaw no idea why, is inside. Bluestar is curled up in her nest, I look at her feeling a pang in my chest. Goldenflower licks the sick leader's head to cool it, like a mother with her kit. "Yellowfang has given her catnip and feverfew." Goldenflower murmurs to us.

"We can only wait now and pray to StarClan. Will you be okay to sit with her?" She asks us and I nod absent mindedly and the queen pads softly out of the den. I listen to her shallow and rasping breaths. I can hear her breathing as it falters in a weird rhythm as the night past agonizingly slowly.

Her breathing stops just before dawn. Fireheart almost dozes off when he realizes the cave is silent. I stare at my mother's body, feeling my heart break as I remember my father's passing. Fireheart seems calm, as if he's seen this before.

Suddenly Bluestar gasps and I feel weak with relief. "Fireheart, is that you?" She mews in a raspy voice. "Yes, Bluestar, I'm here."

"I have lost another life," Bluestar whispers and I look at her. "When I lose this one, I will not be able to return." I feel my surroundings slip away. My mother only has one life left. I blindly jump to my paws and run from the den.

I look around the clearing blindly before stopping as something cold and wet lands on my back. I look up and see that it is snowing. This is my first leaf-bare, I've never witnessed snow. Fireheart came out of Bluestar's den and looks up in surprise and wonder.

More snow is on the ground around camp. I hear Tigerclaw barking orders for the nursery wall to be padded to keep out the cold. "Then I want a hole dug to store our fresh-kill. Use snow to line it then put more snow on top once it's filled. Might as well make use of the snow while it's here."

Warriors race around Tigerclaw following his orders. "Mousefur, Longtail! Organize some hunting parties. Fireheart, wait!" He stops the orange tom as he pads across the clearing. "Oh, I suppose you need rest. I can't imagine you being useful on a hunting party this morning."

My fur bristles in hostility and I stalk up to Tigerclaw. "Unlike you, Tigerclaw, we sat by our sick leader's side all night, because we care and all you did was sit around the camp all night. If you think Fireheart's useless then you definitely are. You could have gone night hunting before the snow hit but you didn't so shut your muzzle before I do it for you!!"

The tabby stares at me with his amber eyes. Mousefur gives me a look that says she's surprised but glad someone was finally speaking their mind to Tigerclaw. The dark brown tom glares at me inching closer.

"I've just about had it with your mouse brained attitude. Don't think because you're the Clan leader's daughter that I can't punish you." I meet his hostile glare with my own.

"And I've had enough of you, you piece of fox dung. And don't think that just cause you're the deputy that I won't claw your pelt off your body and use it to line my nest for leaf-bare!!" Sandpaw looks at me with admiration and I wave my tail at her in greeting.

Tigerclaw looks like he wants to pounce on me but holds himself back. I snarl at him before padding over to Fireheart and entering Yellowfang's den together. "That was amazing Emberstep. No one's ever had the courage to talk back to Tigerclaw like that, not even me."

I rub his cheek with mine. "I was tired of him jibing at you. I have had enough of that fox hearted traitor." Fireheart gives a weak purr

and turns to call into the den. "Yellowfang?"

"Hush," she calls back, springing from Cinderpaw's bracken nest. "She's finally sleeping after a rough night. Until she recovered from the shock, I couldn't give her poppy seeds to ease the pain."

"But she's going to live?" Fireheart asks in anticipation and worry. "I can't be sure just yet, not for a few days. She's hurt inside and one of her hind legs is badly broken."

"But it'll mend won't it," he pleads desperately and I look at him sadly. "She'll be training again by new-leaf?" Yellowfang shakes her head, her orange eyes fill with sympathy. "Fireheart, I'm sorry, but whatever happens, Cinderpaw can never be a warrior."

Chapter 9: Greencough

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

"Cinderpaw can never be a warrior.”

". . .does Frostfur know?" Fireheart asks feeling dismay and I lay my tail across his back. "Yes. She was in here until dawn. She’s back in the nursery now. They're are other kits to tend to. I’ll keep an elder with Cinderpaw. She needs to be kept warm."

"I’ll do it," Fireheart whispers stepping towards the bracken nest. I gently nudge him away with my nose. "You need rest, I’ll stay with her. Go to your nest in the warriors den." I gently push him toward the fern tunnel. As soon as he is gone, a cough racks my frame and I feel dizzy.

I felt my cold coming on a couple days ago but I couldn’t rest. I had to look after my Clan, it’s my duty as a warrior. I expected the cough to subside but it only got worse. Yellowfang comes closer to me and looks at me as I cough.

I feel her orange gaze on me and look at her. "It’s just a cough," I tell her once I can breathe again. "It’s not just a cough. You have whitecough."

"What?! Don’t be absurd, I feel fine." I cough again and Yellowfang shakes her head. "You could spread it to Cinderpaw go and rest in the other bracken nest." I start to protest but she pushes me to the other side of her den and has me curl up. I can hear my own rasping breath. "I’ll bring you herbs that I can spare."

"She’s over there. She has greencough." I hear Yellowfang’s rasping mew. "What?! Last night you said it was whitecough!" I hear Bluestar’s panicked voice and I want to open my eyes but it’s like

they’re glued shut. "Mother! I can’t open my eyes!" I hear fast pawsteps and feel my mother’s fur.

She’s suddenly pulled away from me. "Bluestar, you just recovered from greencough, you can’t get it again!"

"She’s my kit!!" My mother argues and I hear Yellowfang mew gently. "I know, she’ll be taken care of. But you can’t lose your last life. We need you to lead us out of leaf-bare." She mews to Bluestar more quietly.

"If you get greencough while your daughter is still sick and you die, she may not have the strength to fight the rest of this greencough!" I hear Bluestar mew something before her pawsteps depart. I try to open my eyes again but fail.

Something is wiped against my eyes, it feels like a leaf. Grit and something else it wiped from my eyelids and I’m finally able to open them.

I hear another set of paws enter the medicine cat den. I cough painfully and feel miserable. "Emberstep! You have greencough, are you okay, Bluestar just told me?" I look up at my worried mate and purr but it gets cut off by another spout of coughing.

"Where’s Graystripe, he’s usually with you?" There’s a flash of anger in Fireheart’s eyes. "He’s off getting ‘peace and quiet’ again and I have half a mind to claw his ears off." I look at him worriedly and he sees my eyes.
"Is there anything I can get you?"

"Some water would be nice." I whisper hoarsely and he nods, licking the top of my head. I watch him race out of the fern tunnel. Another cat comes in after Fireheart and races over to my nest. It’s Rainpaw.

She stops in front of my nest. "Rainpaw, you can’t be in here or you’ll get sick."

"I had to see how you were doing. Are you going to be okay?"

"It’ll take more than a cough to finish me off. I’ve survived through

worse. I'll be fine go and train with your brother."

"I can't Graystripe's not here and you're sick." Now I'm angry at Graystripe. He's dragging his apprentice down in training with this nonsense. I'll have a word with him as soon as I can yell at him again. "When you see Graystripe, you tell him to come visit me as soon as he can. Okay?" My apprentice nods and scampers off.

I lay in my nest and soon Fireheart returns carrying a dripping wad of moss. I purr with laughter but it's cut off by a coughing spell. "Here you go, my love," he meows dropping the moss in front of me. I stretch my neck toward it and lick up drops of water. "Thank you, Fireheart. You have to go, I don't want you getting sick," I mew hoarsely, resting my head on my paws.

"I can't leave you while you're like this!" He mews sadly, worry glittering in his eyes. "Okay, furbrain. Then do me a favor. Find Graystripe tell him he's a mousebrain, he's letting his apprentice down and needs to come see me right away!" I mew angrily and Fireheart purrs.

"I've missed your fire, Emberstep." I purr happily. "Go, Fireheart, cuff him on the ear for me." My mate nods and pads out of the medicine cat den. "I love you," I mew quietly, closing my eyes.

I wake up and look around, I'm near Sunningrocks. "Am I back in StarClan?"

"Yes, welcome, Emberstep." I look up and see Spottedleaf. "I'm not dead, am I?" Spottedleaf purrs in amusement and sits beside me. "No, you're still breathing. I'm here to warn you."

"Warn me? About what?" Spottedleaf looks away sadly. "I shouldn't but I can't sit idly by and watch. Tigerclaw is getting more treacherous, you must be careful. Keep a watchful eye on him." I stare at Spottedleaf and she purrs, she knows something I don't. I watch her disappear and then I'm waking up in the medicine cat's den.

"You're fever has gone down, Emberstep. I think you'll feel better in no time." I look up at Yellowfang and purr, happy that a cough

didn't interrupt me. "Thanks for taking care of me, Yellowfang. How's Cinderpaw?"

"She's doing well. But she still needs lots of rest."

"I'm sure you'll get her better in no time, Yellowfang," I mew coughing.

Chapter 10: Moons Passed

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I leave the warriors den and look around camp, everyone looks crestfallen. So much has happened these past moons. Tigerclaw showed his true colors when he tried to kill my mother, a fire ripped through our camp, Graystripe is in RiverClan with his two kits after Silverstream died during the kittening, Tigerclaw is now Tigerstar leader of ShadowClan.

Yellowfang died and Cinderpelt is now our Clan's medicine cat. "Emberstep!" My thoughts are interrupted by my mate's voice. I look up at Fireheart, who's now the new deputy, I purr as he winds his body around mine. I recently found out that I'm pregnant with Fireheart's kits.

The Clan needed some good news for once. I was hoping it would cheer Bluestar up, she's been quiet and withdrawn. "I'm going out on patrol, I'll see you later for hunting?"

I nod and he pads toward the camp entrance joining his patrol; Thornclaw, Longtail, Mousefur, Swiftpaw, and Brightpaw. I go to the fresh-kill pile and grab a shrew. I pad over to the Highrock and slip through the lichen.

"I brought you some prey, Bluestar." I look and see her curled up in her nest, back to the entrance. "I'm not hungry, take it to the elders."

"But you must eat, you'll need your strength."

"I don't want it." I stare at her sadly, I look up as a tail is laid across my shoulders. Whitestorm looks down at me, eyes sympathetic. "Go young one, I'll stay with her." I nod and leave the shrew with him before backing out of the den.

"Morning!" I look over at my sister, Sandstorm, sitting with Dustpelt. I wave my tail in greeting. I look and see Rainsplash, chatting with Brackenpelt and Cloudtail. Ferncloud is sunning herself along with Brindleface.

"Emberstep, want to go hunting?" I turn and look, seeing Willowpelt padding over to me.

"Uh, sure," I mew and pad out of camp with my former mentor. I go up the ravine and smell the air. Something delicious hung in the air. "Do you smell that?" I ask the pale she-cat and she sniffs the air. "What is that? It smells good."

"I don't know, I've never smelled it before." I sniff and follow the scent. The trail leads me to a space under a hawthorne bush. I duck and squeeze through following the smell. Suddenly something makes a loud clash and something comes crashing down.

I whip around, eyes wide, shiny webs barred my way. I swipe my paw at it but it doesn't do anything. "What is this? I've never seen cobwebs so strong before." I claw and push my body against it but nothing changes.

"Emberstep! Hold on! I'll get you out!" Willowpelt rushes forward pulling at the webs. "I can't....get it open!" The pale she-cat huffs in frustration. "Willowpelt, go back to camp and get help!" She shakes her head, slamming her shoulder into the odd den.

"GO!" I yowl at her and she finally turns and races back in the direction of camp. I hiss and growl as I push against the cold material. "For StarClan's sake, open," I yowl loudly and claw at it.

"Emberstep?" I scan the undergrowth for a flame pelt. "Fireheart?! Is that you!" My mate appears from the brush and spots me. "Oh, no. Hold on." He rushes forward and starts clawing and pulling with his teeth at the shiny web. "It won't....budge!"

He slams his body into it, rocking it, but it doesn't do anything. "Fireheart, I'm scared!" I say clawing at the webs. "I'll get you out, I promise." I nod and then my ears perk up as I hear something. "Fireheart, do you hear that?"

My mate stops what he's doing and listens. I hear something making loud noises. My heart nearly stops when I realize what it is. "Twolegs!" Fireheart's green eyes widen and he claws even more furiously. I look in the direction of the twolegs sadly.

"Fireheart, it's not going to work! You have to get away before they see you!"

"No! I won't leave you!" He pulls on the web with his teeth as the twolegs get closer. "Just go! Quickly!" I hiss at him but he shakes his head. The twolegs aren't that far away now and I begin to panic. "GO!" I spit at him and he looks at me for a long time before finally turning around and racing away.

I crouch down, pressing my belly into the ground, ears flatten and fur bristling as the twolegs come into view. There's two of them, speaking nonsense to each other. Both are males. One crouches low to the ground and looks into the web.

Once he sees me his eyes widen and he calls to his companion. He reaches in and picks up the web and I hiss and growl. "Stay away! Let me down!" I snarl and slam into the web. The twolegs make noises that I don't understand.

I'm carried away and I look back at my home. I see Fireheart appear looking after me in helplessness. I look and see a monster, I hiss in fear and crouch down. The twolegs open the back and set me inside, I feel more fear as I see other webs filled with cats.

"Where are they taking us?" I ask, speaking to anyone that would answer me. A black and brown tom answers me. "To hell. To a place where housefolk come in and pick whatever cat matches their fancy." I shudder at his words. I scratch at the web again.

"You'll never break through that cage. There almost indestructible," a brown tabby she-cat calls to me and I glance at her. "A cage?"

"It's what your trapped in, a cage. I'm Izzy by the way, what's your name?"

"I'm Emberstep." She gives me a strange look. "You must have weird

housefolk." I snort and shake my head. "I don't live with twolegs, I'm a Clan cat."

"Oh, you're one of those wild cats." I nod and the monster roars to life and I crouch down as it begins to move. *StarClan help me!*
I curl up on the floor of the cage and feel my heart ache. I glance down at my stomach and question of what will become of my kits if I have them outside of the Clan. What if I can't protect them? I rest my head on my paws and close my eyes.

Chapter 11: New Home

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I open my eyes blinking against the sunlight streaming into the nest. I look around my heart plummeting as I recognize the twoleg nest I'm trapped in, as it does everyday I wake up here. Hoping it was just a bad dream.

I've been trapped in this wretched place for a half-moon. I stand up and hop out of my soft nest, stretching my legs. I hear short and high screams and sigh. It's the twolegs's, that took me, kits. They run around the nest like newborns.

I pad out and see them running around their parents, hanging on to them like burrs. They see and call to me. I stare at them and flick my tail in annoyance. The female twoleg picks up something and pours it into my food dish.

I hiss in disgust as I listen to the pellets drop in. I ignore them and make my way over to the window, I jump up and stare at the outside. I've been biding my time and waiting for a chance to escape. I'm suddenly stroked and I jump startled.

I look and see the twoleg kits, stroking me. I arch my back and hiss before jumping to the floor and racing uphill of the twoleg nest. I look around hoping to find a way out. Everyday, I explore looking for the smallest place I can squeeze out of. I sigh and sit down, exhausted, I lick my paw and drag it over my ear.

I just hope I can get out of here before I start kittening. I look out into the sky and think about Fireheart, I hope he's alright.

🔥 Fireheart 🔥

I walk back to camp, pads tired and sore. I spent another day, scouring twoleg place searching for Emberstep and have come up

empty again. I've asked everyone, Smudge, Princess, but they haven't seen her. They've promised to keep a look out but my hope is dwindling.

Where did they take my love. Is she still alive? What will happen to our kits? But that's not the only problem I face. There's a pack of vicious dogs in our territory. Lostface lost her eye and Swiftpaw lost his life. Tigerstar is behind this some how, I just have a strong feeling.

I enter camp and Sandstorm rushes over to me, eyes wide and hopeful. I look at her, tail drooping and shake my head. Her ears flatten and her tail droops as well. She moves closer pressing the side of her face into my chest, seeking comfort. I sit and press my flank to hers.

I look up and see Graystripe pad out of the warriors den. After a scuffle at Sunningrocks, Graystripe betrayed RiverClan and helped us defeat Leopardstar. "You didn't find her?" Graystripe asks and I shake my head.

"It's like she's disappeared. Princess and Smudge haven't seen or heard anything about her. I don't know where they've taken her and it makes me feel so helpless." Graystripe rests his tail on my shoulder and I blink gratefully at him. I look and see the sun is going down.

"I think it's best to go and sleep, worry in the morning." Sandstorm and Graystripe nod and pad off to the warriors den. Before I settle down for the night I go and visit Cinderpelt.

I enter the medicine cat den. Cinderpelt is sorting herbs. I look and see Lostface asleep in her nest with Cloudtail curled around her. I'm proud of my nephew, he's not left her side since she was brought back to camp in a terrible condition. "How is she?"

"She'll be all healed up in no time."

"Thanks for all you've done, Cinderpelt."

"All in a days work, Fireheart. Goodnight." I dip my head and say

the same before leaving. I head for the warriors den and slip in, I curl up in my nest, beside Graystripe and Sandstorm. I stare sadly at Emberstep's empty nest and feel my heart break. I miss you, my love. I close my eyes and slip into sleep.

I open my eyes and look around, I'm at Sunningrocks. "Wha- am I in StarClan?"

"Yes, my dear Fireheart." I look up and see Spottedleaf. I jump to my paws and pad up to her. "What am I doing here?"

"I'm here to warn you. Your enemy is closer than you think and danger looms very close. It will take all of you to survive."

"What do you mean?" I ask the dapple she-cat. "Beware an enemy who seems to sleep," she mews before she begins to disappear. "Wait don't go!" I yowl but she's already gone. "Please.....I'm so alone..." I hang my head closing my eyes tightly. "Emberstep, please come back," I whisper to myself, lying down and curling up.

"Fireheart!" I open my eyes and look around. Sandstorm stands above me looking down at me in concern. "Are you alright?" I gaze up at her, blinking to clear sleep from my eyes. "You were making noises in your sleep."

"I was? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"Can't wake me if I was never sleeping." I sit up and look at her. Dustpelt makes a noise and shifts in his nest. I beckon Sandstorm outside and we pad out into the center of camp. I sit and curl my tail around my paws, looking up at Silverpelt. "I miss her," I whisper and Sandstorm brushes her tail against my flank.

"I miss her too. Our Mother took it very hard when she heard the news of Emberstep's capture. She barely speaks anymore."

"She believes StarClan really has turned their back on her. They've taken everything from her. Her mate, her daughter, her deputy tried to kill her. She's not in a good place right now."

"No, she's not, I'm worried." I nod, staring up at the stars. Emberstep, please stay safe out their. And please find your way

back home. Back to me. "I think we should try and get some rest. Something tells me it's going to be a long day tomorrow." Sandstorm nods and together we stand and enter the warriors den.

I curl up and gaze out into the clearing. StarClan please watch over Emberstep, wherever she is and guide her home.

Chapter 12: Wasp And Hornet

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I open my eyes and stand up, stretching. Another half-moon has gone by and I'm tired of being holed up in this place. I'll get out today if it takes all day and night. I go on my daily patrol of the twoleg nest. As I finish going up the small ravine I look around.

I gasp when I see strange colored pelts moving from a breeze. I look up and see where the wind is coming from. I jump up and sniff the air. I crouch down and wriggle through, dropping to the grass below. "I'm finally free!"

I rush forward and gaze around. "How do I even begin to find my way home?" I ask myself. "Looky what we got here boys, a new pretty kitty in the neighborhood."

I slowly turn around and see three tom cats. The leader is a black tom with white stripes and dark green eyes. The tom left of him is a brown tabby and the other tom is dark gray. I crouch low to the ground and hiss, growling warningly.

The leader laughs and shares a look with his friends. "What do you think Smoke, Ollie?" The leader asks them, giving me a strange look. "I don't know, Reaper, maybe we should tell her how dangerous it is to be all alone out here," Ollie mews and Smoke laughs.

"She's not alone," a she-cat mews jumping down beside me. I look and see a she-cat with a black pelt, white forepaws, white undertail, and white streak across her lower neck. Her dark yet bright blue eyes are full of anger. "Hornet! What are you doing on our side of town?"

"Please, Reaper this isn't your territory." A new voice speaks and I look to see a gray and white tom. He jumps down beside Hornet.

"Wasp! Looks like the lowlifes are taking over. Let's get out of here," Reaper hisses and bounds away with Ollie and Smoke.

I sigh and relax a little looking at the two cats. "Thanks for the save." Hornet tilts her head and looks at me curiously. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"Uh, no, I was taken from my home in the forest by twolegs."

"Twolegs?" Wasp asks me and I look at him. "Oh, um, housefolk." Their eyes fill with recognition. "You lived in the forest? Isn't that dangerous?" I laugh at her question and sit up. "No, I lived with my Clan, we protected each other."

"Clan? Wait you're one of those wild cats I've been hearing about?"

"Yes. Wait you know about us? Can you help me find my way home?" Wasp shares a look with Hornet. "Please, I can't have my kits in this place!" Hornet's eyes widen in joy. "Kits! Congratulations! We have to help her Wasp!"

"But the wild cats are like three towns over!" Wasp argues and I stare at him. Hornet gives him a look and they stare at each other for a long time. "Fine," he turns to me before continuing, "Me and my sister will help you find your Clan." I perk up, jumping to my paws.

"Thank you, so much."

"Don't mention it, we're glad to help."

"So what's your name?" Wasp asks and I dip my head. "My name's Emberstep."

"Which Clan do you belong to, from what I've heard there's four," I purr at Hornet's curiosity. "There is. ThunderClan, RiverClan, WindClan, and ShadowClan. I belong to ThunderClan."

"Wasp! Hornet!" We turn around and my eyes widen. A fox comes racing towards us. I flatten my ears and growl viciously at the orange pelted predator. The fox skids to halt in front of me, ears flat in fear. Hornet wraps her tail around my shoulders.

"Emberstep, calm down it's okay, this is Todd."

"He's a fox!"

"Correct, I'm a fox so what?" I stare up at him in shock as I can understand him. "Wha- I... I can understand him!"

"And I can understand you."

"Todd!" I look and see a pretty tortoiseshell she-cat bounding towards us. "I'm sorry about him, he saw you guys and got excited. Todd, you know better than to run off on your own." He flattens his ears again and looks at the she-cat. "Sorry, Lily." She purrs and rubs her head against his snout.

This is not normal, I think to myself as I stare at Lily. "Lily and Todd grew up together after her housefolk found Todd in their backyard, abandoned and injured when he was barely six moons old. That's why you can understand him, Emberstep. He grew up with Lily and learned our way of speaking."

I nod slowly, I'm still having trouble processing this. "Well, Lily we'll be gone for awhile. We're going to help, Emberstep get back home."

"Did she travel too far from her housefolk?" I shake my pelt out in distaste. "No, she's a wild cat." Lily's eyes widen and she looks at me. "That's so strange. Well, good luck getting home."

"Thank you, Lily and goodbye to you Todd." The young fox yips excitedly. "Bye, Emberstep, bye Wasp, bye Hornet."

"Bye, Todd," Hornet mews, licking his chin before waving her tail in goodbye. I walk away with them, talking. "So, what's it like in ThunderClan?"

"Oh, it's amazing. You catch your own food, protect your Clanmates, it's unlike anything, it's pure freedom."

"Sounds like what we have. We don't have housefolk either but lately we've been having a lot of trouble with Reaper and his friends."

"Reaper. What a name. He seems very full of himself."

"Ever since Snake left this neighborhood, Reaper has been trying to claim it as his own."

"Who's Snake?" I ask looking around. "Snake lived with his housefolk right over there," Wasp mews pointing with his tail. I look and see a twoleg nest close to a small and narrow Thunderpath. "He was a good friend of ours and every time Reaper came close to his territory he would battle him and send him running back home."

I laugh lightly. "Where's Snake now?"

"We don't know. His housefolk were cleaning out the den and they just disappeared one day, taking Snake with them," Hornet mews and I shudder. "Poor, Snake."

"Oh, I'm sure he's fine, his housefolk always took good care of him." I nod and follow them as they lead the way across the thunderpath. My stomach has started getting bigger and I just hope it doesn't slow me down.

"So who's the father?" I startle at Hornet's question. I flick my tail and duck my head. "His name is, Fireheart. And he's ThunderClan's deputy."

"What does it mean to be deputy?" Wasp asks and I look at him. "It means after my mother, Bluestar, who's leader, dies he'll become the leader after her. He'll go to Mother Mouth and speak with StarClan and receive his nine lives and new name, Firestar."

Hornet gazes at me in awe. "Nine lives? Do they really get nine lives?"

"Don't be silly Hornet, I've never met a cat that had nine lives."

"I've seen my mother die from greencough and come back. You tell me that's not nine lives." Hornet gives Wasp a look and he snorts. "I'll believe it when I see it," he mews but I see a look in his eyes that tells me he just might believe me.

I purr and he glances back at me. He shakes his head and continues looking ahead. I nearly yowl in joy as we leave the twoleg place behind. "Don't get too excited, Emberstep, we still have to pass through three more before we're even close to your forest." I nod but am still happy to be out of that place.

We stop and rest near a large oak tree. "Hornet, stay here and protect Emberstep, I'm going to see if I can catch us some prey."

"I don't need to be protected!" I hiss and he gives me an amused glance. "Fine, you might not need it but you'll get it anyway. At least your unborn kits need protecting. Think about them as well." With that he bounds away and I look down at my stomach.

"He's right you know," Hornet mews and I lay down. "I know he is. I just...wish Fireheart was here. I can only imagine how much worrying he would do right now. Probably start bring me water with a moss ball and catching all my prey."

Hornet purrs and sits beside me. "He sounds like a great tom cat."

"A great friend too and I just know he'll be a terrific father. I miss him." The black and white she-cat licks my cheek and rubs her head against mine. "Don't worry, you'll see him again. Me and Wasp will make sure of it."

"Thanks, Hornet," I mew and she purrs. A few moments later Wasp returns with two robins and a starling. Wasp sets the starling in front of me and I blink gratefully. "Thank you, Wasp."

"No problem," he mews before setting a robin in front of his sister. I bite into my starling and begin eating. By the time we're all done the sun is slowly lowering in the sky. It's a little past sunhigh. "We can keep going for a little longer and cover a little more ground before nightfall."

I nod and stand up, burying the remains of the fresh-kill. We continue on and I share more stories about my Clan and all we've been through. After the story about how we drove Brokenstar out of Shadowclan, Hornet gets a little excited.

"Emberstep, do you think you could teach us some fighting techniques?" I stare at Hornet wide eyed. "You really want to learn my Clans moves?"

"Yes! We can help protect you more effectively." I purr at her hopeful gaze. "Sure, I can teach you a few things. I had an apprentice, Rainsplash, she soaked up knowledge like moss in water. We can do it after we settle down for the night before going to sleep." They nod and we continue moving through the forest.

I get anxious when we enter another twoleg place. I notice Wasp get a little uncomfortable. "Wasp, you don't have to-"

"It's fine, besides we need a safe place to rest." I stare in confusion as Wasp bounds ahead. "What's that about?" Hornet turns to me. "Our mother and siblings live here. A long time ago a large group of cats moved through this town, when Wasp and I were young. They were violent and vicious. Our mother fell in love with one of the toms and joined his group."

I stare at her as she continues. "As I was growing up they wanted Wasp to go on a raid with them, every time there was a raid, innocent cats died. When Wasp said no they threatened to take me instead. So Wasp went with them, during the raid Wasp was able to kill the patrol leader.

The group scattered and I've heard of some of them taking refuge in the next town over. I just hope we don't see any familiar faces when we pass through." Her story chilled me, she bounds after her brother and I follow suit.

Chapter 13: Shelter

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

We make our way through the twoleg place. Wasp leads the way to an abandoned twoleg structure. We slip into the building. "It's not much but at least we'll be out of the cold," Wasp mews and I thank him. "Intruders!" I hear someone hiss and growl.

Hornet presses herself against me, protectively. "Back off, Tike, it's me. Wasp." Moonlight shines through and reveals a brown tom with black paws. He gazes at Hornet and I with suspicion. "Why have you come back after all this time?"

"I'm helping this she-cat get back to her Clan. She was taken by twolegs. We needed shelter and I would like to speak with Tawny."

"She's back with Shado. Welcome back, brother," he says not at all in a welcoming manner. He turns and leads the way. Hornet encourages me to follow. Tike leads us farther into the abandoned nest. "Tawny! You won't believe who showed up!" Tike shouts out.

"Who is it, Tike?" A she-cat asks, stepping out of the shadows. She's a brown and black tortoiseshell. Her amber eyes widen when she sees Wasp and Hornet. Tawny rushes forward and presses herself against Wasp. She then does the same to Hornet. "You've come back! My kits!"

I gaze at the exchange happily. Thinking to my own soon to be born kits. Tawny looks at me and tilts her head. "Who's this? Are you Wasp's mate?" My eyes widen, as she gestures to my stomach with her tail, and heat floods my pelt. I shake my head quickly.

"Oh, no," Wasp and I mew swiftly. "No, my mate's Fireheart. Wasp and Hornet are helping me get back home after twolegs captured me. I'm Emberstep, nice to meet you." She presses her nose to mine in greeting.

"Welcome, and I'm happy your having kits of your own, it is a blessing." I purr and thank her. "Tawny," I hear a soft mew and I look up to see a tiny black she-cat. She gasps when she sees Wasp and Hornet. "Your back!"

"Hey, little Shado," Wasp mews and licks the top of her head. "You must be exhausted, rest and we'll talk in the morning." Hornet and Wasp nod and she leads us to a quiet and dry place to sleep. I curl up and feel Hornet curl up beside me and Wasp on the other side. I purr, as I'm falling asleep I feel Wasp shift closer and I accept his warmth.

×Hornet×

I wake up to someone nosing me. I open my eyes and see Tawny, amber eyes gleaming. "Hornet, get up," she mews softly and I push myself to my paws. She flicks her tail to something behind me. I turn and immediately want to purr with amusement.

I see Wasp and Emberstep curled around each other. "That is the cutest thing I've ever seen," I tell my mother, whiskers twitching. "He's going to be so embarrassed when he wakes up," I mew softly. She laughs and rasps her tongue over my ear.

"Let's go hunting, just the two of us, we have so much to catch up on." I nod and follow her out of the nofur structure. Together we are able to catch 3 measly mice and 3 birds. We head back and slip into the abandoned structure.

I pad over to where Wasp and Emberstep were still curled up. "Morning guys!" I say a little loudly. They begin to stir and Wasp is the first to open his eyes. "You have prey," he says as his eyes land on the two mice and bird. My whiskers twitch and he gives me a confused look. I flick my tail to the still waking Emberstep.

He looks down and sees how close he is to her. He pulls away scrambling to his feet. I meow with laughter and he glares at me. The sudden movement fully woke her. She opens her eyes and arches her back, stretching and yawning. "Good morning, Emberstep." She flicks her tail in greeting. "Good morning, Hornet. I had a strange dream last night."

"Really, what about?"

"I was back in the nursery and I had my kits. And other Queens were around me but I didn't recognize them. There was this strange warmth around me and it felt nice and cozy," she mews before turning to look at my brother. "You were there."

My brother stiffens and glances at me. I shrug my shoulders and Emberstep continues speaking. "Yeah, you were standing in the entrance to the nursery and asking how the kits were, then I don't remember anything after that."

"Sounds like a very interesting dream, don't you think Wasp," I ask a little playfully. His ear flicks and he looks at me. "Am I going to get some of that prey or do I have to catch my own."

"Oh, no, this is all for Emberstep, Queens eat a lot." Emberstep laughs at my humor but my brother is not so amused. I lay the bird down in front of Emberstep and she thanks me. I dip my head and then give my brother one of the mice.

"After food I think I should see how well you know those battle moves I showed you a few days ago," Emberstep mews and I nod biting into my mouse. After we finish eating we set up a fake battle me versus Wasp.

"Alright, remember claws sheathed. Start!" She calls and Wasp launches himself at me. I slide to the left and he sails past me. I turn and jump onto his back, pummeling his spine with my paws, claws sheathed. Wasp drops to the floor and just as he rolls to try and crush me, I jump off.

I turn onto my side, slip under Wasp's belly, bat it with my claws sheathed, then swiftly turn back onto all fours and slip out from under him. Wasp launches himself over me and before I can turn around he's yanking on my tail with his teeth. I'm knocked off balance.

Wasp then bowls me over and pins me down. "Okay, okay.....you win," I mew, panting and he purrs stepping off me. I can hear Emberstep's purr of amusement. "That was great. You guys have the

makings of warriors." I purr and dip my head.

Wasp looks and sees the sunlight has brightened. "I think we should leave soon before we waste too much daylight. It's a long journey to the next town." Emberstep nods, getting to her paws. "I'll tell, Tawny," Wasp says padding across the den to our mother.

I watch our mother's eyes widen in sadness. She presses against Wasp and he rests his head on hers. I pad over and say goodbye to her, Tike, and Shado. I wave my tail in farewell and begin walking. "Be safe!" She calls and I call back. "We will!"

"We got a lot of ground to cover," Wasp says once we're outside. "Let's get started," I mew and Emberstep purrs.

Chapter 14: Terrible Timing

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I pad slowly behind Hornet, my stomach swollen with kits. We've been travelling for so long, my fear gets worse everyday that I'll give birth outside of my Clan. My stomach has also been slowing us down. The sun is slowly sinking in the sky and I knew Wasp would soon suggest stopping for the night.

Throughout our journey Wasp has become increasingly careful and worried about me. He's started asking how I'm feeling as we're journeying and if I need to rest. Hornet is more subtle about her worrying. But all of it is slowing us down. And I'm aware I need to think about my kits before myself. And it just starts a cycle of guilt inside me.

The sky is getting darker and Wasp notices. "I think we should stop for the night, find a safe place to sleep." Hornet nods and I don't argue as I'm overcome with exhaustion. Wasp goes searching for a safe place to rest while Hornet stays with me.

"How are you feeling?" Hornet asks me, brushing my flank with her tail. "Tired and a little hungry."

"Don't worry I'll go hunting after Wasp finds a suitable den." I nod and rest my head against her shoulder. She licks my head and we wait patiently for Wasp's return. The brush rustles and he bounds into view. "I found a clear space under a hawthorne bush, this way." We get up and follow the grey and white tom.

He leads us to the hawthorne bush and I sink to the ground and rest my head on my paws. Hornet goes hunting and Wasp stays with me. "You okay?" He asks laying beside me.

"I'm fine, furbrain, stop worrying so much. I'll tell you if something is wrong." He purrs and bumps my shoulder with his head. I've

grown very close to Hornet and Wasp, their great friends and very caring. "Wasp, after...after I get back home, what will you and your sister do?"

He looks at me thinking. "I don't know, I guess we'd go back home or at least return to Tawny. It was nice seeing everyone." I feel a pang in my chest at the thought of him and Hornet leaving. "I'll miss you both when your gone," I whisper, leaning my head against his shoulder.

He nuzzles my cheek with his nose. "We'll miss you too, Emberstep." I close my eyes as he presses his flank against mine. Sharing a moment of silence as we think about what the future might hold. I hear rustling and open my eyes to see Hornet slip from the brush. She's holding a rabbit and two starlings in her jaws.

She comes over to us and sets the rabbit in front of me and a starling in front of Wasp. "What have you guys been chatting about?" She asks after setting her starling in the grass and laying down. "Emberstep, was asking about what we'll do after we get her back home. I told her we'd probably return to ours or at least stay with Tawny and everyone else."

Hornet nods but I see she too want's to distance that day. We begin eating as the sun starts to disappear. After we finish we bury the remains. I sleep under the hawthorne with Hornet and Wasp. I curl up with them on either side of me, keeping me warm. This entire time with everything they've done, they've always kept me in mind.

I thank StarClan to have met them outside that twoleg nest. I wouldn't have made it this far without them. I close my eyes and drift off to sleep.

•Wasp•

"Wasp! Wasp! WAKE UP! I jolt awake to the sound of my sister's panicked voice. "What's happening?!" I hear yowling and look to see Emberstep convulsing on the grass. Hornet near her haunches.

"The kits are coming!" My sister shouts and my eyes widen. "What do we do?!" I ask as Emberstep let's out a pained yowl. "I need you

to go find me a thick, sturdy stick." I nod and race from the bush and look around wildly.

I see a thick yet short stick, I snatch it up and rush back to Emberstep and Hornet. I slip under and set the stick down. Hornet snatches it up and presents it to Emberstep. "Here, bite down on this when you feel pain."

As soon as Emberstep takes it from my sister I hear a crunching sound as she bites down hard. Hornet pays attention to Emberstep's hindlegs. "Wasp, try and keep her calm." I nod and move to Emberstep's side.

I smooth her bristling fur down with my tail and lick the top of her head. "I see one!" I hear my sister call. I see her dip her head down and then I hear mewling. Hornet lifts her head and I see a dark orange tom-kit with white splotches.

She sets him at Emberstep's belly and returns to her hindquarters. Another convulsion goes through Emberstep, I hear the stick crack more. "And another one." More mewling and Hornet sets a dark gray, almost blueish she-kit, beside her newborn brother. "I think this is the last one, Emberstep!"

The last spasm goes through the ginger she-cat. Hornet sets a white speckled black and sandy orange tortoiseshell she-kit alongside her siblings. Emberstep lets go of the stick as the last of her pain disappears. She gazes, with tired eyes, at her three mewling kits.

She leans forward and licks them from spine to head, ruffling their fur causing it to stand up. The kits after being warm wriggle their way to her belly and begin nursing. "What will you name them?" Hornet asks looking down at them.

Emberstep looks at her beautiful kits. She touches her nose to the ginger and white tom-kit. "Cloverkit," she mews softly, love in her eyes. She then looks to the tortoiseshell she-kit. "Applekit," she looks to the blue gray she-kit and something flashes in her eyes. "Brookkit," she mews and nuzzles them lovingly.

"Terrific names, Emberstep. Their beautiful," Hornet mews.

Emberstep purrs tiredly and dips her head in thanks. Dread fills me as loud yips sounds outside. I whip around just as a ginger snout is pushed under the bush, growling loudly.

"Fox!" Emberstep hisses curling protectively around her newborn kits. I lash out with my claws and the fox yips in pain redrawing it's snout. Before it can slip back in, I rush out growling. "Wasp!" Hornet and Emberstep call.

I growl and launch myself onto the orange predator. I claw ferociously and the fox growls angrily. I see Hornet rush over and I feel panic. "No, Hornet, protect Emberstep!"

"I am! And my idiot brother!" I roll my eyes and bite down on the back of the fox's neck. The fox growls and whips his head throwing me off. I hit the ground hard, knocking the breath out of me. As I try to catch my breath the fox looms above me, growling.

Hornet appears in front of me snarling and claws the Fox's snout. He rears his head back before lunging and latching his teeth into my sister's throat. I force myself to my paws, ignoring the tightness in my chest. "NO!"

A shadow burst from the undergrowth, surprising the fox and me, the fox let's go of my sister as the shadow tackles him. They roll together on the ground making terrible noises and disappearing into the undergrowth.

I rush to my sister, ignoring the noise of battle. Blood seeps from the wound on her neck, staining the grass crimson. I nose her, trying to rouse her. "Please, wake up," I mew softly tears in my eyes.

Her eyes remain closed and I look and see how still her flank is. "Hornet, no! Your my sister, I'm suppose to protect you, not the other way around. Please, don't go!" I press my cheek to hers. My heart breaks as I realize my little sister is dead.

I realize the noises have stopped. I look up and see someone slip out of the brush. I feel surprise as I recognize them. "Todd?" I squint and see the energetic fox step into the weak moonlight. He bounds over to me and looks down at Hornet.

"She's gone," I mew and Todd's ears flatten, his eyes sad. I look up and see Emberstep staring at Hornet's body in shock and horror. "I'm sorry, I didn't get here quicker."

"It's not your fault, Todd," I whisper looking at my sister. I press my nose into her fur. "Todd, can you come keep my kits warm," I hear Emberstep ask. He nods and wriggles under the hawthorne bush. Emberstep comes over and looks down at Hornet.

"I know she did not live in Thunderclan nor was she born there but she had the heart and bravery of the greatest warrior. I ask that StarClan watch over you, Hornet and lead you to your new home in the stars and that we may see you again one day." She presses her nose into my sister's fur.

"Thank you," I mew and she licks my ear in attempt at comfort she leaves me to mourn, returning to her kits. Todd leaves the bush and sits outside of it. I don't move from my spot for a long time. Taking a moment of mourning.

I finally stand and wriggle under Hornet getting her on my back. I find a nice place and slip Hornet off my back carefully. I begin digging a grave for my sister once I'm done, I gently set her into the grave and push the dirt into the hole.

I step back and look at the dirt. I breathe deeply keeping my tears away. "I love you, Hornet and I'll miss you." I turn and head back to the hawthorne bush. I look up at Todd. "Todd, I don't know why you're here but thank you, without you five more lives would have been lost. Goodnight," I mew and he dips his head, lying down and curling up.

I slip under the bush and see Emberstep curled up, her kits sleeping against her flank. She lifts her head up and gazes at me. She says nothing and I'm grateful. I curl up beside her and gaze at the sleeping kits. Hornet gave her life to protect me, these kits, and Emberstep, a debt I will never be able to repay.

Chapter 15: Five Moons Old

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I watch Applekit, Cloverkit, and Brookkit play with Wasp and Todd. Todd has been a great help with the kits and would help with hunting and protecting me and the kits. We needed to wait for the kits be old enough to make the journey to ThunderClan territory.

We will be continuing the journey in a few moments. Applekit jumps on Wasp's back and he purrs batting playfully at Cloverkit. "Alright, I think we should be on our way, come along kits." They groan in disappointment. This will be their first long journey and I just hope they can make it.

Wasp and Todd stand up. "Now remember if any of your feet start to get sore, tell me or Todd and we'll carry you."

"My feet are sore," Cloverkit say jokingly and Wasp rolls his eyes but rasps his tongue over my son's ear. "Let's go." We begin moving, Wasp leading the way.

We finally enter the last twoleg place near night fall. Applekit is lying on Todd's back, nearly asleep. Cloverkit is in Wasp's mouth and Brookkit is resting on my shoulder blades. We move quickly but carefully through the twoleg place. Eventually I take the lead as I find familiar territory.

Eventually I find a twoleg nest and a cat catches my eye. I freeze and focus on the cat. A pretty light brown tabby with a white chest and paws. "Princess!" I yowl and she stiffens looking in my direction.

Her eyes light up and I rush over to her, almost forgetting that Brookkit is still on my back. I skid to a halt, ignoring my tiny she-

kit's claws. I press my cheek to Princess' and purr happily. "Emberstep, who's this." I pull away from Fireheart's sister. "This is Princess, Fireheart's sister."

Wasp dips his head in her direction. Princess' eyes wide in shock as her eyes settle on Todd. "I'm Wasp and this is Todd."

"Uh, nice to meet you." Applekit jumps up and looks curiously at Princess. The brown tabby looks at the kit in surprise. "Oh, how adorable." I purr and Brookkit slips from my back and Cloverkit stands beside his sisters.

"Princess, these are my kits. Applekit, Brookkit, and Cloverkit." Princess looks at Cloverkit. "He has the colorings of Firestar and the patterns of you." I realize what she says and look at her. "Firestar? He got his nine lives?" She nods and I feel sadness at the news that my mother passed.

"How is he?" Princess' eyes widen in realization. "Oh, you don't know."

"Know what?" I ask worriedly. "The Clans are gone. Their territory was destroyed by twolegs." My heart nearly stopped. "What?" She nods eyes sympathetic. "Come with me." I follow her and what I see I wish I could unsee.

Wasp follows behind me with Todd and the kits. Wasp gasps as he looks at the remains of my home. The trees were lying on the ground, the grass has been ripped up. "Great StarClan! How could this happen. Where's my Clan, where are the other three Clans?"

"Firestar told me that if Graystripe came by that I should tell him to go to Barley and Ravenpaw. So you should try that." I nod still in shock of the wreckage that used to be my home. "I'm sorry, Emberstep, travel safely. I hope you find them." She presses her nose to mine.

"May, StarClan light my path," I mew and she dips her head. Together we journey quickly through the barren forest. I lead the way to Barley's barn. As soon as it comes into view, I quicken my pace. "Ravenpaw! Barely!" I call waiting for the loner to come out.

The black and white tom slips out of the twoleg structure. "Emberstep? Ravenpaw, come quick!" The loner rushes forward, rubbing his head against my neck in greeting. "Barley, what is it?" I look up as Barley pulls away. Ravenpaw comes out and when he sees me his eyes light up!

"Emberstep, you're alright!" He bounds toward me, winding around me. "It's nice to see you too, Ravenpaw."

"Are you two Clan cats?" Cloverkit mews curiously, gazing up at the two loners. "No, Cloverkit, these are loners, they don't belong to a Clan or twolegs. Ravenpaw, Barley, these are my kits; Cloverkit, Applekit, and Brookkit."

"Your kits?! Their beautiful! I'm guessing Firestar is the father." Ravenpaw mews and I dip my head. Ravenpaw looks and notices Wasp and Todd. At the sight of Todd, his ears flatten and a growl rumbles in his throat. "Easy, Ravenpaw, this is Todd, yes he's a fox but he saved my life." Barley flicks his tail toward Wasp.

"And him?"

"Oh, this is Wasp, he's the reason I was able to get here. Now, Ravenpaw, where did the Clans go?"

"Last I saw they were heading for the mountains," the black tom flicks his tail toward Highstones. I nod and look at Wasp. "We should get going if we want to make it before dark. Thank you, Ravenpaw, Barley," I mew to both of them and they purr.

"Anytime, you kits take care," Barley mews looking down at them. "We will, bye Barley and Ravenpaw," Applekit mews and I purr. "May StarClan light your path!" Ravenpaw calls as we bound away.

"Emberstep, what if we don't find the Clans?" I look down at Brookkit, her eyes dark with worry. I lick her head. "Don't worry, we will find them." I look at Wasp and he smooths my fur with his tail.

"We will," he mews reassuringly and I blink gratefully at him. Todd is up ahead with the kits, Wasp and I hang at the back. We travel in

silence, no sound but the kits laughter as they talk amongst themselves. I look up as we reach Highstones. "We should rest here," I mew and lead the way to Mother Mouth.

We descend into the dark tunnel. "Come along, Cloverkit," I mew as he drags his paws. "Mom, I'm tired," he mews softly and I purr quietly before leaning down and picking him up by the scruff. Wasp purrs in amusement.

I go all the way down to the Moonstone. It's the only familiar place that hasn't been destroyed by those wretched twolegs. As we begin to settle down the moonlight broke through the clouds and shone down on the Moonstone. The crystal came to life, flooding the cave with it's light.

"What's happening?!" Brookkit asks fearfully, slipping under me and hiding under my belly fur. I purr at my kits reactions. "Don't worry, little ones. It's just the Moonstone. Clan leaders would come here to contact StarClan, this is where new leaders would receive their nine lives."

"Weird," Todd says, staring at the crystal. "It's cool," Cloverkit mews and I purr. "How do the leaders communicate?" Brookkit asks standing between my paws. "The leaders would lay in front of the Moonstone and touch the surface of the crystal with their noses. Then they would drift off to sleep and wake up in StarClan's hunting grounds."

My kits stare in awe at the Moonstone. "Alright, enough story time, we need to rest." I curl up on the floor of the cave and my kits scamper to my side, curling up at my flank. I curl my tail around them, resting my head on my paws.

Wasp curls up next to me, close to the moonstone Todd lays near me, ears pricked and alert. I close my eyes and drift to sleep.

•Wasp•

I hear the chirping of birds and open my eyes. I lift my head up, squinting at the sudden light. I look around and see that I'm near a riverbank. I see a large slab of rock. I jump to my paws, staring

around in confusion.

"Where am I?"

"You're in StarClan, Wasp." I look and see a blue gray she-cat, a scar in between her shoulders. My mind flashes to Brookkit. "Who are you?" I ask her curiously. "My name is, Bluestar, former leader of ThunderClan."

"Former?"

"When I died, Firestar replaced me. I don't have much time. I've come to tell you something important." I realize that she's Emberstep's mother. "I will hear what you have to say," I mew respectively and her whiskers twitch.

"Hard times lay ahead of you and your group. Emberstep will go through something difficult and you must not abandon her, she'll need you by her side." My fur bristles at her words. "I would never abandon, Emberstep!" She gives me a smile. "I know, but now you'll have a reminder. It will be hard for her but it was destined to happen."

"What was destined?" I ask the starry she-cat but she begins to fade and I panic. I jolt awake and look around wildly. My eyes settle on Emberstep's outline. I sigh, her presence calming me. I lean forward, pressing my nose into her fur. We've been through so much together, how could I even think of walking away now? I'll never abandon Emberstep, as StarClan is my witness.

Chapter 16: Tribe Of Rushing Water

[image]

•Wasp•

I pad behind Emberstep as we clamber through the rough mountains. We've been traveling for so long, my pads were beginning to hurt. I glance at Emberstep as she nudges Cloverkit forward.

I didn't tell the ginger and white she-cat about my trip to StarClan or the chat I had with her mother. The truth is I wouldn't even begin to know what to say. It was a vague message and I myself didn't really understand it but I had a feeling that when the time is right, I'll know.

I look up to see a ledge and no where to go around. I step in front of my friend and leap up, pulling myself up. I turn as Emberstep, grabs Brookkit by the scruff and lifts her up toward me. I take the blue grey she-kit and set her beside me.

I turn back to get Cloverkit and Applekit, setting them by their sibling. Emberstep leaps and lands beside me. Todd jumps and lands less gracefully, nearly slipping off. Emberstep and I haul him up by his scruff.

Todd flicks his white tail tip gratefully. "Let's continue, shall we?" My friend nods and calls to her kits. We continue on our way as we journey deeper into the mountain I get an uneasy feeling. Here, we're completely exposed. I look at the kits, their about nearly eight moons now.

Emberstep doesn't want to call them by paw until they get mentors. I gaze at Applekit fondly as she falls back to my side, not speaking but making her presence known to me. I lean down and rasp my tongue over her ear. She rubs her head against my shoulder.

I know I'm not their father but I can't help but feel connected to these kits. Applekit is the sweetest she-cat I've ever met, Cloverkit is feisty and bold, and Brookkit is shy and reserved. I'm about to call to Emberstep when a shadow falls over us. I stiffen looking up to see a bird larger than a hawk.

It was heading straight for Applekit. Emberstep turns and calls out. I grab Applekit by the scruff and toss her towards her mother. As soon as she catches Applekit, the bird's talon's grab ahold of me, attempting to lift me into the sky.

Pain spreads through my body as it's claws puncture my skin. I hiss and struggle. "Wasp, no!" Suddenly the large bird cries out and I'm released, hitting the rocks below. The impact jars me and I see stars, pain jolts through my body.

Someone rushes to my side and licks my cheek. "Wasp?! Please, no!" Her voice is sad and panicked. "I'm- I'm alright," I whisper and she sighs in relief. "You scared me to death you mousebrained tom." She hisses angrily but I knew she was just concerned.

She touches her nose to my cheek. "You saved me, Wasp." I look and see Applekit padding up to me with her brother and sister. "All in a days work," I mew before attempting to sit up, Emberstep helps. Once on my paws, I lean against Emberstep for support. I look and see three mud streaked cats standing around the bird.

"You killed it," I mew in surprise. "You must be careful on this mountain or the next eagle will be having cat for dinner." Brookkit's ears flatten in fear and I brush her flank with my tail. I feel blood dripping from my pelt.

"You're injured, come with us, Stoneteller will heal you." The mud streaked tom mews. I look at them. "Who are you?"

"My name is Talon," the tom mews. "I'm Brook where small fish swim," the blue gray she-cat mews and Brookkit looks up at her. "And I'm Gray Sky Before Dawn, follow us, quickly before another eagle appears." Emberstep nods and the three cats carry the eagle and lead the way.

We soon arrive at a waterfall. We follow the strange mountain cats behind the cascading water, entering a large cave. As we enter more cats appear. Staring at us curiously. I watch the three cats drag their fresh kill to a pile. "Stormfur, where's Stoneteller?" Brook asks a gray tom.

"He's in the cave of pointed stones."

"Call him, tell him we have visitors with three kits and something else." Brook looks back at Todd and Stormfur follows her gaze. He stiffens and flattens his ears. "It's okay, Stormfur, just go get Stoneteller." The gray tom nods and disappears farther into the cave.

After a few heartbeats Stormfur returns with an older cat. A brown tabby tom. "What is this I hear about visitors?"

"We found them while hunting, an eagle tried to carry one off, he's injured," Brook mews, saying something else to him and Stoneteller pads over to me. He looks down at the kits. "Screech, Splash, Pebble!" A black tom, a light brown tabby she-cat, and gray she-cat appear.

Stoneteller gazes at the kits. "What are your names little ones?"

"I'm Cloverkit!"

"I'm Brookkit."

"And I'm Applekit."

"Lovely names, Splash, Pebble, and Screech why don't you take these kits and play while I work on their father," the tabby tom mews, Emberstep opens her mouth but is interrupted by the young cats. "Okay, Stoneteller!" The kits follow them across the cavern.

"Come with me," the tom mews and Emberstep and I follow. He takes me to a cleft and starts removing herbs. "Tell me your names strangers."

"I'm Wasp and this is Emberstep." The ginger and white she-cat dips her head. "Emberstep, you may join your kits, Wasp is in good

paws." Emberstep turns to me. "You going to be okay?" I nod and she pulls away from me and bounds toward her kits.

"I'm not their father."

"Hmm?"

"I'm not the father of those kits."

"But yet you risked your life to save, Applekit. Brook told me."

"So, any other cat would have done the same thing." Stoneteller turns his blue eyes to me. "Not all cats are the same, but I'm sure you know that." The brown tabby tom goes silent as he begins to work. He makes a poultice with herbs and applies them to the wounds on my body.

"We're short on nests you and your....friend will have to share a nest for now."

"Thanks, Stoneteller." He dips his head and leads me to an indent in the floor padded with heron feathers. I sink down slowly and settle down. The kits notice me and scamper over. "Will you be okay?" Brookkit asks me and I purr. "I'll be fine, little one."

I notice Applekit hanging back a little. "Applekit what's wrong?"

"It's..my fault you're hurt."

"No, no, come here," I mew and beckon her forward. She pads up and I gently pull her into the nest and nuzzle her cheek, causing her to laugh. "All I did was protect you from a big mean eagle, that wasn't your fault. If it was anyone's fault it was the eagle's, and I was saved by these nice cats. So don't blame yourself, Applekit. Okay?"

She nods as Emberstep pads up with Todd, purring. "The sun's going down, I think it's time we settle down for the night." Emberstep settles beside me and the kits lay at her belly. Applekit curls up at my chest and I feel my heart swell as I gaze down at her.

I love these kits so much. I'd die for them. I look up at Emberstep's

purr, her whiskers twitch as she gazes at the small tortoiseshell she-cat curled up with me. And I'd die for Emberstep. If it meant that they would live, StarClan could take me right now and I'd die happy. Todd curls up a little ways behind us.

He's been silent for awhile. He's been less talkitive since...since Hornet. I'm wondering if this has to do with him blaming himself. I'll talk to him about it in the morning.

"Emberstep, these cats are weird," Cloverkit mews and Emberstep shushes him. "Their not weird, this is the Tribe Of Rushing Water. Their just different, their ways are estranged from ours. But they took us in and saved Wasp's life that's all I care about. They can believe in flying hedgehogs and it wouldn't matter to me. Now go to sleep."

The kits quiet down and drift to sleep. I lay my head down, careful not to disturb, Applekit. I close my eyes and wait for sleep. Emberstep rests her head next to mine. I purr quietly before going to sleep.

Chapter 17: Shattered Heart

[image]

🐾Emberstep🐾

I watch my kits playing with Splash, Screech, and Pebble. I hear pawsteps approaching me. I turn and see Stormfur padding toward me. "Greetings, Stormfur."

"Greetings, Emberstep." He sits beside me and stares at me. "You're a Clan cat, aren't you?" I stare at him. "You know about Clan cats?"

"I am one." I freeze and feel a sliver of hope stir in my chest. "You are?"

"Yes, RiverClan." I look him up and down and something clicks. He's gray, my mind flashes to Stormkit and Featherkit, the small bundles brought into our camp with Graystripe. That a war nearly started over these kits. "Stormfur, is...is Graystripe your father?" He nods and I gasp. "I remember when you were just a kit. What led to you joining the Tribe?"

"Uh, when our territory was being destroyed by twolegs all four Clans sent a cat to find a new home, to go to the sun-drowned-place. We talked to a badger named Midnight. And when we got here we met the Tribe. They were being terrorized by a mountain lion they called Sharptooth. Feathertail died killing Sharptooth. She's buried at the base of the cave. The second time we came through with the Clans, I stayed behind, to be closer to Feathertail and I fell in love with Brook."

"I'm sorry about, Feathertail. I wish I could have been there to watch you and your sister thrive and grow up but I didn't."

"You missed a lot of pain and suffering."

"But I also missed the greatest part of my Clan's life. Do you know where the Clans are now?"

"They've settles around the lake it's just passed our mountains. I could lead you there, if you want?"

"I couldn't ask you to make that long journey there and back, we'll find our own way, don't worry."

"Okay, I'll at least escort you out of the mountains. Keep you safe. I hope you find the Clans quickly and safely."

"Thanks," I mew and press my cheek to his. He pads away, going over to Brook. I turn and look to see Wasp chatting with Todd. I'm shocked out of my thoughts by a pebble skidding into my paw. "Pass it back, please," Splash asks and I purr, sending it back to the brown tabby she-cat.

Wing, a grey and white she-cat pads over to me carrying a mouse. "I heard your getting ready to leave now that Wasp is all healed and I thought you might like to eat."

"Thanks, Wing, I appreciate that," I purr and she sets the mouse in front of me and gazes fondly at my kits. "Their beautiful, whose their father?"

"His name is Firestar, an amazing dark ginger tom with bright green eyes." I notice Wing stiffen and I pull away from the mouse to look at her. "What? Did you meet him when the Clans came through?"

"Yeah, he was talking with a sandy she-cat, Sandstorm."

"Oh, that's my sister," I mew and Wing's eyes get a little wider. "Enjoy your prey," she mews before padding away. I stare after her confused. "You okay?" Todd asks, bounding up to me. "Uh, yeah, I'm fine." I begin eating my mouse and finish it in a few bites.

I look around the cavern at all the cats. Over the last few days I've gotten to know these cats and their really nice and very welcoming. Wasp appears at my shoulder and I greet him.

I call to my kits and they look at me before saying goodbye to the others and scampering over to me. I lick Applekit on the head as she stands in between my paws. "I think it's about time to leave, little ones."

"So you're ready to go?" I look up as Stormfur pads over. "I think we're ready," Wasp mews and Todd nods. "Then let's go." We say goodbye to everyone before leaving.

We reach the bottom of the mountain and I press my nose to Stormfur's. "Thank you for everything, Stormfur."

"Don't mention it. Good luck, Emberstep." I wave my tail in farewell and he does the same before he goes back up the way we had come. I turn to Wasp and he notices the look on my face. "What's wrong?"

"Is it strange to say that I'm afraid. I don't know how much my Clan has changed or how many of my friends and loved ones even survived the journey here!" He shushes me and purrs in amusement.

"You have nothing to be afraid of, they're your Clan. Let's just go without looking back, see what happens when we get there." I purr and bump his shoulder with my head. At the top of the mountains we could see the lake and know the direction we need to head for. So me, Wasp, the kits, and Todd begin our, what seems never ending journey, again.

•Wasp•

We finally make it to the lake and are padding through moorlands. "Stop, right there," a tabby tom mews slipping from the gorse with two other cats. I see a black tom with green eyes and a light brown tabby tom.

Emberstep stands up straight, bringing her kits closer with her tail. The tabby's eyes flick to the kits and I see them soften a little. "What are you doing on, WindClan territory?"

"My name is Emberstep, please take me to Tallstar." The cats share looks with each other "Tallstar, is dead, Onestar is now WindClan's leader." Emberstep gets a grim look and she bows her head. "Then take me to Onestar, please."

The tabby looks back at the kits before nodding. I didn't realize that Todd wasn't with us until I turn to look for him. He must have

gotten scared and ran when the WindClan cats jumped out at us. Emberstep pads after the WindClan cats and I follow close behind.

They take us to a shallow scoop in the ground that's open to the sky. We enter camp which is buzzing with activity. The WindClan cats freeze and stare at us. I see a brown tom and Emberstep freezes, seeming to recognize him, I guess that's Onestar.

His eyes light up and he bounds toward us and Emberstep purrs. He presses his nose to her cheek, purring loudly. "Onestar, this is Wasp, he helped me get here and these are my kits." He pulls back, looking at the kits and his eyes get brighter.

"They're beautiful, they're almost nine moons! What're their names?" The kits step forward and look up at the tom curiously. "I'm Cloverkit," her son mews puffing out his chest causing Onestar's whiskers to twitch. "I'm Brookkit," she mews softly and Onestar purrs.

"I'm Applekit." Onestar looks up at me and dips his head. "Wasp, this is Onestar."

"Emberstep and Firestar found my Clan after we were driven out by ShadowClan's leader at that time Brokenstar. They brought us back home and saved a few lives, saved all of our lives. I owe a great debt to her."

"I need to go to ThunderClan but I'd like to leave the kits with you to make sure I'm welcome. Is that alright?"

"I mean of course. I'm sure you'll be welcome but some how if you're not there's always a place for you here. Just continue through our territory until you smell, ThunderClan." She thanks him and rubs her head against his. "I'll be back my lovely kits," she says to them, nuzzling them. "Wasp, will you come with me?" She asks looking at me and I nod following her out of camp.

We journey the rest of the way through WindClan territory. We eventually jump over a stream, entering ThunderClan territory. I notice Emberstep getting more excited. My whiskers twitch as she picks up the pace.

There's a rustle in the brush as we near their camp and a dark gray tom slips out and freezes when he sees us. He crouches down, ears back, growling. "Dustpelt, stop growling. Don't you recognize me?" Emberstep pads closer and Dustpelt stops growling as he gazes up at her.

"Emberstep? You're....you're back!" He jumps to his paws rubbing his cheek against hers. "Well come on, everyone will be so excited to see you." Dustpelt encourages her and she follows him, I follow close behind. When we reach the entrance, Emberstep slows down, looking down into camp.

I sit beside her and look around too. The camp is buzzing with activity. So many cats crossing back and forth. I notice Emberstep stiffen and I follow her gaze. I see an orange tom cat and a sandy she-cat, sitting together. Then I notice a smaller she-cat the same color as the tom and another she-cat that's a light brown tabby.

"Dustpelt, who are those two she-cats talking with Firestar and Sandstorm?" Dustpelt looks and seems to realize something because he gives her a sympathetic look. "That's Squirrelflight and Leafpaw. Firestar and Sandstorm's daughters." Even I stiffen and note Emberstep's angry and heartbroken look.

"Uh, Dustpelt, don't tell him you saw me, please."

"But-"

"Please!" She begs and Dustpelt nods. "I won't, I promise, go before someone sees you." She nods and takes off at a run. I look at Dustpelt before following her. Once in WindClan territory she slows down, looking around in a panic. "How- how could he do this to me. And my sister! What am I going to tell my kits?"

I brush my tail against her flank and shush her. "I don't know, Emberstep but the truth is always a good place to start. Let's get back to camp." She nods slowly and I lick her head before we begin our walk back to camp. As soon as we're back she brings her kits to her. "Before anything else, I think you need to rest," Onestar mews cutting Emberstep off.

"Go rest, Emberstep and say what you need to later." The tired she-cat nods and goes to a quiet spot in the shade with her kits. I watch them curl up. "You must be tired as well, Wasp go rest." I nod and go lay down a small distance away from Emberstep giving her some space. Perhaps this is what, Bluestar was talking about.

Chapter 18: New Addition To WindClan

[image]

•Wasp•

I watch the kits playing in WindClan camp. Their now paws, Emberstep and I have been living in WindClan camp for awhile now. Onestar asked if it was okay for him to assign mentors to her kits and she agreed. Tornear is mentoring Cloverpaw, Owlwhisker is mentoring Brookpaw, and Ashfoot is mentoring Applepaw.

I get up and decide to go hunting. I leave camp and look out over the moors. I see a rabbit and crouch low to the ground. I steadily creep up and when I'm close I take off at a run. The rabbit's ears pick up and it looks at me and starts to run.

I catch up to it and launch myself at it. I grab ahold of the small creature and bite down on the back of it's neck, delivering the killing bite. I pick up my prey and return to camp. I go to the elders den and peek in and see Morningflower a tortoiseshell she-cat and Rushtail a light brown tom.

"I brought you some prey," I mew and they look up purring gratefully. "Thank you, Wasp. How is Emberstep?" I glance at Emberstep, she's chatting with Whitetail, a small white queen. She's been staying in the nursery helping with kits, she didn't want to go back to warrior duties just yet and Onestar understood.

"Wasp!" I look and see Crowfeather, a dark tom. He seems pretty serious but he can be really carefree when he wants to be. "What is it, Crowfeather?"

"Onestar wants you to go to the gathering tonight."

"Oh, ok, is Emberstep going too?" The dark tom shakes his head. "She's still tired from the journey." I know the real reason, she

doesn't want to risk running into Firestar or her sister. "But I've never met anyone else from another Clan."

"Don't worry, Owlwhisker will stay by your side the entire time and tell you what you need to know. Just relax and be yourself." I nod and he pads away. "Don't worry, Wasp, I'm going as well and you can stay near the other Clan elders if you want we don't argue much we're too old for that."

I purr at her kindness. "Please you don't look to be over twelve moons." She mews with laughter and I dip my head before leaving them to their prey. Emberstep bounds toward me giving me a sympathetic look. "I just heard, I'm sorry you're going to be all alone at the gathering."

"Not totally alone, I've got Morningflower and Owlwhisker by my side so I'll be fine."

"You don't have to go, you know that, right?"

"Yes, I'm aware, don't worry about me."

"If I don't worry who will?" I purr and she presses her cheek against mine. "Wasp!" I look and see Cloverpaw scampering toward me with his siblings. "What is it, little one?"

"Wasp, were not little anymore," the ginger and white apprentice declares and I purr. "You'll always be little to me. Now what can I do for you?"

"You promised you'd train with me today. Remember?" It dawns on me that I did indeed promise the kits that I'd help them perfect their fighting techniques. "I remember we'll start in a little bit, go over to the Tallrock." The kits bound over to the large rock.

"Go, wouldn't want to keep them waiting now would we." I purr and say farewell, rushing over to the kits. We begin practicing in the center of camp. After what seems like forever it's time for the gathering. Onestar calls the chosen cats to him. I mew goodbye to the kits and pad over to the brown tom.

I stay beside Owlwhisker and Morningflower as we leave the camp

entrance. And the small patrol begins the trek to the island where gatherings take place. I follow close behind Owlwhisker and jump up onto the tree bridge and jump down onto grass below.

Owlwhisker beckons me through the brush and I bound through. I see a large tree and two groups of cats down below. I see Firestar up on one of the branches. On another branch is a white tom with jet black paws. "Looks like ThunderClan and ShadowClan are already here," Owlwhisker mews and I nod.

Onestar makes his way through the crowd of cats and ascends up the tree, settling on a branch beside Firestar. "Okay, the tom on the other side of Onestar is Blackstar, leader of ShadowClan he's a seriously stern cat. The RiverClan leader isn't here yet but it's Leopardstar." I nod and look at all the surrounding cats.

There's rustling in the brush, I turn and see more cats slip into the clearing. I see who I guess is Leopardstar weaving through the throng of cats and climbing to her place amongst the other leaders. I look lower and see eight cats settled among the roots. I point them out to Owlwhisker.

"Those are where the deputies and the medicine cats sit. There's Russetfur of ShadowClan, Mistyfoot of RiverClan, Ashfoot as you know of WindClan, and Brambleclaw of ThunderClan." I look at a russet she-cat, blue gray she-cat that reminded me of Brookpaw, and a dark brown tabby tom with black stripes.

"Then we have the medicine cats. Cinderpelt with her apprentice Leafpaw of ThunderClan, Littlecloud of ShadowClan, you already know Barkface of WindClan, and Mothwing of RiverClan." I nod and listen to the loud chattering of the cats around me. Suddenly Firestar let's out a yowl, beginning the gathering.

I look up at the large tree at all the leaders. "Prey is well in ThunderClan and we're grateful to have survived the long journey here and the territory that shall sustain us for hopefully many moons to come." Many cats murmur in agreement.

The next cat to speak is, Blackstar. He says mainly the same thing as Firestar. Then Onestar steps forward to speak. "We have two new

additions to WindClan. Unfortunately only one of them could accompany the patrol to the gathering. She was tired from her long journey and remained in camp taking a long deserved rest with her kits who we have made apprentices."

The WindClan cats yowl their support but I notice the other Clans stare at them in suspicion and shock, with the exception of ThunderClan. "They assume WindClan has taken in rouges, loners, or kittypets," Owlwhisker mews to me.

"And who are these new additions, Onestar?" Leopardstar hisses looking at the brown tom sideways. "I will not disclose the mother, make her a target she will make herself known in time but please welcome her companion who is with us tonight, Wasp."

All of the Clans seem to rake WindClan with their gaze, searching for me. Once I'm found I try my best to sit tall, feeling my pelt heat up at their gaze. "Wasp? You say you've integrated them into your Clan but he has yet to receive a proper warrior name."

A long haired gray tom with a darker gray stripe going down his back, in ThunderClan's section, yowls in protest. A tabby she-cat soothes him, brushing her tail against his flank. Leopardstar narrows her eyes at the warrior, seeming to have a personal problem with the tom.

"How can we trust these cats if they refuse to commit to warrior life. Onestar, WindClan isn't becoming soft like ThunderClan I hope," the unusual spotted golden she-cat mews. Earning the growls and protests of WindClan and ThunderClan.

"I don't think we need to discuss softness here, TigerClan, or would you like to get a conversation going?" The WindClan leader replies calmly and Leopardstar's eyes widen before narrowing into slits. "Alright, enough bickering like kits," Blackstar mews and Firestar nods in agreement. They jump down from the branches, joining their Clans below.

But we don't leave just yet. The Clans stick around sharing stories and even sharing tongues. I watch in amazement as four Clans that can't seem to stand each other laugh and share memories. I sit next

to Morningflower as she speaks with Heavystep a thickset tabby tom and Ivytail a brown tabby she-cat of RiverClan.

"Morningflower!" I hear a tom call and look up to see Firestar padding over to the WindClan elder. He presses his nose to the she-cat's cheek. "How are you?" The flame pelted tom asks in concern. They seem to be old friends. I stay quiet and hope he doesn't notice me. "I'm doing well, thank you for asking Firestar."

The ThunderClan leader purrs and is about to pad away when his green eyes find me and he freezes. "You're Wasp, right?" Not knowing what else to do I nod. "How is Windclan life? Has the Clan made you feel welcomed?"

"Yes, I've been on a few patrols and have made a few friends." Firestar purrs and dips his head before he turns to Morningflower. "Could you give us a moment?" The elder she-cat looks at him then me, I nod and she pads away with the other elders. I feel anxiety fill me as the tom gazes at me.

"Your companion is still in camp?" I nod afraid of where this conversation is going. "Is your companion's name, Emberstep?" I stiffen at the question and look at him, his eyes are filled with hope. I nod and his demeanor improves.

Chapter 19: A Vague Warning

[image]

•Wasp•

I slip into camp and pad over to the kits. They're curled up at the edge of camp. WindClan cats like to sleep out under the stars, it makes them feel closer to StarClan, elders take shelter in a badger set and nursing she-cats take shelter in a gorse bush. When the weather gets bad WindClan retreats to underground burrows.

I look down at them fondly as they are curled up with their mother. I maneuver and curl up beside the ginger and white tabby she-cat. As I settle she lifts her head up, looking at me sleepily. "Wasp? How was the gathering?" I nuzzle her gently with my muzzle. "I'll tell you in the morning, for now let's sleep."

She nods her head, nuzzling me back before resting her head on her paws. I rest my head on my own paws next to her. I watch as the patrol from the gathering settles amongst their loved ones. I gaze at them sadly as, Hornet slips into my mind. I wish she was here with me, we could hunt and race like we used to.

I feel a tongue rasp my cheek. I look and see Emberstep gazing at me in understanding, still awake. "I miss her too." I close my eyes in sorrow, pressing my cheek to hers. The warmth of her fur soothes me and lulls me to sleep.

I open my eyes and look around, not recognizing where I was at first. I quickly realize that I'm in ThunderClan territory. The sounds of battle reach my ears making me flinch. It gets louder but there is one voice I can hear above all the others: Emberstep's.

I race forward and burst into a small clearing. Battle wages all around me. I recognize WindClan and ThunderClan cats, tackling each other. "Firestar! Stop! Get off him!" I hear Emberstep's angry growling. I look and see her dragging a cat off of Cloverpaw.

I rush forward and almost stumble in shock as the cat was, Firestar, Cloverpaw's father. As soon as he sees me, Cloverpaw races over, cowering behind me. I look up, at first in anger, until I see the expression on the ThunderClan leader's face.

Shock and horror. I let my fur lie flat but Emberstep wouldn't soften. "How dare you! How dare you raise your claws to him! You're a father, you have two daughters! You've changed and I do not like the cat you've become. You're dead to me!" She hisses at him and he flattens his ears after closing his eyes, a heartbroken expression on his face.

He called for ThunderClan to retreat and I watch them flee farther into the forest. Firestar is the last to leave, looking at Emberstep one last time before following his Clan. "Why....why did he try to hurt me? I though he was nice."

I look down at Cloverpaw, he's peeking out from behind me, looking up at Emberstep and I. I gaze at him sadly and lean forward to lick the top of his head. "We'll discuss that later." The apprentice nods at his mother, pressing into the ground as if to appear smaller.

"You're safe now," I mew, pressing my flank against him. A sudden gust of wind brings a familiar scent to my nose, I lift my head and search the undergrowth with my eyes. A black and white pelt catches my eye, I gasp as I realize that it's Hornet.

Another cat appears beside her and I recognized her blue pelt. The stars in their fur sparkle. My surroundings fade and are replaced with StarClan's hunting grounds. "H-Hornet?" I mew softly and she gives a short nod.

My sister rises to her paws and pads silently closer to me. Bluestar remains in place, staying quiet. Hornet sits in front of me, gazing at me calmly. "Wasp, you must tread carefully for a war will soon begin brewing."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Beware for even dying embers may spark a fire. If you are not careful the flames will swallow up everything you hold dear."

"Hornet, I don't understand, please tell me what you mean." But she was already fading away. "Wait! Don't go! Please!" I jolt awake, feeling myself tremble even though I'm not afraid. "Wasp, are you alright?" Her voice is a low whisper and I look to see, Emberstep.

Dawn dimly lights the camp. I shake my head and she looks at me with concern. "Let's go somewhere so we don't wake anyone and you can tell me what's wrong." I nod and get up, making our way carefully out of camp.

Once we're far enough Emberstep stops and sits down, curling her tail around her paws. "Tell me."

"I had this dream, there was a battle. ThunderClan against WindClan. Among all the noise of battle, I heard you very clearly." I recount my dream, what Firestar did and what Hornet said. Emberstep stares at me, my words sinking in.

"Even dying embers may spark a fire. If you are not careful the flames will swallow up everything you hold dear. I'm not sure what that can mean, I'm mean except the obvious things, danger seems to be coming."

"I think we need to be careful around ThunderClan," I tell her and she nods slowly. A strange scent is brought to my nose by the wind and I jump to my paws, along with Emberstep. I turn and see a small number of cats approaching.

I recognize Harespring and Weaselfur. With them is two, I don't recognize. A sandy pelted she-cat and a white she-cat with grey markings. "Great, StarClan." I hear Emberstep whisper and I look at her. The grey and white she-cat spots her and perks up.

The young she-cat comes running up even though Harespring calls her back. Emberstep runs to meet her and I follow. Once their close enough the grey and white she-cat winds around Emberstep, purring loudly. "It's so great to see you, Rainsplash. How are you? How's everyone?" I realize this is Emberstep's former apprentice.

"I'm great, my kits are nearly old enough to become apprentices." Emberstep stares at her, purring happily. "That's great who's the

father." I see her eyes grow sad. "His name was Sootfur, Willowpelt's son, he died during a badger attack."

"I'm so sorry. What're their names?"

"Frostkit a white tom-kit and Violetkit a dark gray she-kit."

"Emberstep?" Her purring is cut off by the pale sandy she-cat speaking up. "Why are you staying in WindClan?" I watch her eyes narrow to slits and I suddenly remember who this is. It's Sandstorm, Emberstep's sister. Who had kits with Firestar.

"Why don't you ask Leafpaw and Squirrelflight," she hisses and Sandstorm flinches, guilt filling her eyes. Rainsplash gives Emberstep a sorrowful and sympathetic look. "You think I want to return and watch you with my mate, raising the kits you had with him. I'd rather throw myself over the gorge!"

Sandstorm flinches again, sadness in her eyes. I step up beside Emberstep as her voice rises, pressing my flank against hers. "All the fear I felt and that threatened to overwhelm me, I was only able to make it through by thinking to myself I'm going to see him again, I'm going to see Bluestar, I'm going to see you and everyone else. That's what kept me going along with my kits. I needed to be strong for them, I needed to be to keep them alive in hopes that their father could see them for the first time."

More guilt and sadness filled Sandstorm's eyes. "But now, I don't even want him around them and frankly, I don't want you around them either. I'm making a dangerous, terrifying journey and want are you and him doing.....making kits. How long did you wait a quarter-moon? I just...I don't want to ever see you again and if I even see you near my kits at a gathering, I'll personally see to it that you get a new scar."

I stare at Emberstep, I've never seen her angry. It seems she's been holding onto this anger for awhile. "Now, Rainsplash, what do you need? Did you want to talk with Onestar?" Rainsplash nods and Weaselfur leads the way.

Once we enter camp the kits, who were awake, along with the rest

of the camp, came scampering up. "Emberstep, who's this?" Cloverpaw asks, looking up at Sandstorm and Rainsplash. "Well, this is my old apprentice, Rainsplash. She has kits of her own back at camp, maybe one day I can introduce you. Rainsplash this is Cloverpaw, Applepaw, and Brookpaw."

Applepaw and Brookpaw purr. "Oh, Emberstep, their beautiful. Brookpaw looks exactly like Bluestar." I purr and Rainsplash finally seems to notice me. "Now, you're Wasp, right? You were at the gathering the other night."

"Uh, yes, I met Emberstep outside her house folks' house. The town bullies were bothering her."

"Wasp and his sister Hornet rescued me. I don't think I would have made it back here if it weren't for them." She gazes up at me, her forest green eyes, filled with affection. I feel my heart flutter a little and it's never done that before.

"Rainsplash, I loved seeing you again. I can't wait to see you and hopefully your kits next time." She nods and Emberstep leaves, probably to go hunting and get as far away from Sandstorm as possible.